

**ASSESSING EARLY LITERACY USING SCHOOL-BASED  
ASSESSMENT**

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**FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA  
KUALA LUMPUR**

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**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
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EDUCATION)**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
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**UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA  
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## ABSTRACT

Early literacy is an important foundation for learning. The importance of having mastered literacy early is not limited to students' success at school but also extends into their after-school lives. Students with a good foundation in literacy are better prepared to participate as citizens. In line with the Ministry of Education Malaysia's vision of producing world-class citizens, school-based assessment was first implemented in primary schools in 2011. Various studies on aspects such as teachers' readiness, knowledge, understanding and practice of school-based assessment have been conducted using the quantitative method and within the context of secondary schools. The current study therefore aims to examine the assessment methods in the ESL (English as a second language) classroom at two national primary schools and to identify teachers' perceptions of the use of school-based assessment in relation to the practice of early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom. The research design utilised is case study, with the qualitative approach used to collect data, comprising interviews, classroom observation, and relevant document collection. The data collected are then analysed using thematic analysis approach. The study reveals that teachers used various assessment practices including observation, questioning, giving tasks and providing feedback. These practices are not used independently but are incorporated as formative assessment. Teachers felt that their lack of pedagogical and content knowledge are among the biggest challenge that teachers face in carrying out the early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom. Time constraints due to their excessive workload also contribute to the challenges. The study also reveals that pressure from parents to hold examinations and lack of commitment from senior stakeholders in implementing the Ministry's school-based assessment initiative contradicts with the purpose of having the assessment in the first place. This research infers that

information is essential in ensuring quality teaching and assessment can take place in order to achieve the objectives at all level, which requires stakeholders such as the education agencies and parents to be empowered with training and input to be on the same page as teachers and be able to play their role in facilitating the assessment effectively. Further comparative research in various context concerning school-based assessment within the setting of primary school to broaden and deepen the literature are also recommended.

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# **PENILAIAN LITERASI AWAL MENGGUNAKAN PENTAKSIRAN BERASASKAN SEKOLAH**

## **ABSTRAK**

Literasi awal merupakan asas yang sangat penting untuk pembelajaran. Kepentingan untuk menguasai literasi awal bukan sahaja terhad kepada kejayaan pelajar di sekolah, tetapi juga dalam kehidupan mereka selepas persekolahan. Dengan adanya asas yang bagus ianya membantu pelajar dalam persiapan menjadi warga yang lebih baik. Selaras dengan visi Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia untuk menghasilkan warganegara bertaraf dunia, Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah (PBS) telah dilaksanakan di sekolah-sekolah rendah bermula pada tahun 2011. Walau bagaimanapun, kebanyakan kajian yang telah dijalankan dalam aspek seperti persediaan guru, pengetahuan, pemahaman dan amalan PBS dalam konteks sekolah menengah dan menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif. Justeru, tujuan kajian ini dijalankan adalah untuk meneliti amalan penilaian dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris di dua sekolah rendah kebangsaan yang terpilih, dan untuk mengenal pasti persepsi guru terhadap pentaksiran berasaskan sekolah berkaitan penilaian literasi awal dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris. Reka bentuk penyelidikan yang digunakan adalah kajian kes dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif bagi mengumpul data, termasuk temuduga, pemerhatian kelas, dan pengumpulan dokumen yang berkaitan. Data yang dikumpulkan telah dianalisa menggunakan pendekatan analisis tematik. Kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa guru-guru menggunakan pelbagai amalan penilaian termasuk pemerhatian, menggunakan soalan, memberi tugas dan maklum balas. Kesemua amalan ini tidak digunakan secara persendirian tetapi digabungkan sebagai penilaian formatif. Hasil dapatan juga mendedahkan bahawa guru berpendapat kekurangan pengetahuan pedagogi dan kandungan pengajaran merupakan antara cabaran terbesar yang dihadapi oleh guru dalam melaksanakan

penilaian literasi awal dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris. Kekangan masa akibat bebanan kerja yang berlebihan turut menyumbang kepada cabaran tersebut. Kajian ini juga mendedahkan bahawa tekanan daripada ibu bapa untuk mengadakan peperiksaan dan kekurangan komitmen daripada pihak berkepentingan yang lebih tinggi dalam melakukan inisiatif yang dilaksanakan oleh pihak Kementerian adalah antara penyebab berlakunya percanggahan tujuan pelaksanaan penilaian. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa amat penting dalam memastikan pengajaran dan penilaian berkualiti dapat dijalankan bagi memastikan objektif disemua peringkat tercapai, yang memerlukan pelbagai pemegang taruh seperti agensi Pendidikan dan ibu bapa diperkasakan dengan latihan dan input supaya dapat berada dalam satu halaman yang sama dengan guru dan dapat memainkan peranan dalam penilaian secara efektif. Kajian perbandingan lebih lanjut dalam pelbagai konteks berkaitan dengan pentaksiran berasaskan sekolah dalam persekitaran sekolah rendah bagi meluaskan dan mendalamkan literasi adalah digalakkan.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

4W (questions)	what, who, where and when (questions)
AfL	assessment for learning
AoL	assessment of learning
DEO	District Education Office (Malaysia)
EPRD	Educational Planning and Research Division (Malaysia)
ESL	English as a second language
FA	formative assessment
GTP	Government Transformation Plan
HCE	Higher Certificate of Education (see STPM below)
ICT	information and communications technology
JPNS	Selangor State Education Department
KBSM	Secondary School Integrated Curriculum
KBSR	Integrated Primary School Curriculum
KPI	key performance indicator
KSSR	<i>Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah</i> (Primary School Standard Curriculum)
MoE	Ministry of Education Malaysia
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
PMR	<i>Penilaian Menengah Rendah</i> or Lower Secondary Evaluation Test
SA	summative assessment
SBA	school-based assessment
SBT	<i>Sekolah Berprestasi Tinggi</i> or high-performance school
SEAMEO	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization
SED	State Education Department
SEO	State Education Office
SK	<i>Sekolah Kebangsaan</i> or national school
SK1	<i>Sekolah Kebangsaan Satu (1)</i> (anonymised name of first school)
SK2	<i>Sekolah Kebangsaan Dua (2)</i> (anonymised name of second school)
SKK	<i>Sekolah Kluster Kecemerlangan</i> or cluster school of excellence
SMART	specific, measurable with measurement, achievable, relevant, time-oriented (objectives)
SPM	<i>Sijil Penilaian Menengah</i> or Malaysian Certificate of Education

SQA	Scottish Qualification Authority
STPM	<i>Sijil Tinggi Penilaian Menengah</i> or Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education (HCE)
TESL	teaching English as second language
UPSR	Primary School Evaluation Test
ZPD	zone of proximal development

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

For more than 20 years, Malaysia's national assessment system has been practising the accumulation of students' progress through summative assessment rather than formative assessment. These summative assessments, through national examinations such as the UPSR (Primary School Evaluation Test), the PMR (Lower Secondary Evaluation), the SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education) and the STPM (Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education), provided evidence that an increasing number of students were obtaining more 'As'. However, this also led to an unpleasant mindset in Malaysian society that students lacked competencies regardless of the number of 'As' they obtained. This mindset with its over-emphasis on examinations has proven to be significant in reality as most students are still unable to speak English fluently even though they have spent 11 years studying at school and have obtained an 'A' for that subject (Ali, 2003). Realising this issue, the Ministry of Education Malaysia turned to the country's education system, establishing a new form of assessment, the school-based assessment system, to be implemented starting with Year 1 in 2011 and Form 1 in 2012. It was claimed that this approach would establish a more holistic assessment that would assist in producing world-class citizens. Studies are increasingly being conducted to study the effect and outcomes of the implementation of school-based assessment. However, as the implementation is relatively recent, school-based assessment on certain competencies, such as literacy, has not been intensively studied. As stated by Comber and Nichols (2004), early literacy development is regarded as a priority in most governments, with a literate population likely to ensure that the people

will be responsible and self-regulating citizens. This is in line with the Ministry's objective of producing world-class citizens. According to the Ministry, even at the international level, teachers who teach early literacy are under pressure to produce satisfactory results from students. At the same time, although Malaysia has been battling with issues related to literacy for a long time, not much has improved (Soon, 2014).

## **1.2 Background of Study**

In 1982, the Integrated Primary School Curriculum, locally known as the KBSR, was introduced into Malaysia's national education curriculum to replace the old curriculum, with various parties claiming that former curricula were too subject content-based, too focused on rote learning, too dependent on textbooks and too examination-oriented (Hashim, Ariffin, & Muhammad Hashim, 2013).

Since that time, the same education system with its primarily summative assessment has been practised for more than 20 years. Generally, four levels of national examination are conducted. In primary school, students are expected to complete six years of schooling and are tested with the Primary School Evaluation Test, locally known as the UPSR, at the end of Year 6. Students who successfully complete Year 6 then continue their studies in secondary school. Secondary schooling is divided into two levels: lower secondary and upper secondary. The lower-secondary level comprises three years of schooling from Form 1 to Form 3. At the end of Form 3, students sit for another national examination, the Lower Secondary Evaluation Test, locally known as the PMR (*Penilaian Menengah Rendah*). In most national schools, the students' PMR results also facilitate the selection of their field of study, that is, whether to take the science or arts stream. Meanwhile, the upper-secondary level

entails two years of schooling from Form 4 to Form 5. At the end of Form 5, students sit for an examination that will generally determine their pathway after secondary school. The examination for the Malaysian Certificate of Education is locally known as the SPM (*Sijil Penilaian Menengah*). Based on the students' SPM results, they had the option either to continue for two years of Form 6 and to sit for another national examination, for the Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education (HCE), locally known as the STPM (*Sijil Tinggi Penilaian Menengah*) or to pursue their studies at matriculation or foundation level. These examinations had been carried out until the recent transformation in Malaysia's education system.

In the recent Government Transformation Plan (GTP), the Ministry of Education Malaysia has planned changes in the country's national education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). As listed in the *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025*, 11 shifts, in total, are to occur in the education system's transformation. These 11 shifts aim to provide equal access to quality education; ensure children are literate in both Bahasa Malaysia and the English language; develop values-driven Malaysians; transform teaching into a profession of choice; ensure that every school has high-performing school leaders; empower the State Education Department (SED), the District Education Office (DEO) and schools to customise solutions based on students' needs; as well as encouraging the implementation of information and communications technology (ICT) during teaching and learning sessions to scale up the quality of learning across Malaysia. The Ministry will also undergo a transformation to deliver excellent capabilities and capacity, establishing at-scale partnerships with parents, communities and the private sector, maximising students' outcomes for every ringgit spent and increasing transparency for direct public accountability (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Consequently, school-based assessment is one of the initiatives undertaken within the first shift in line with the National Education Philosophy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The National Education Philosophy aims to use a comprehensive and holistic approach to develop the potential of an individual's physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual abilities. Moreover, implementing school-based assessment is one of the ways of fulfilling the aspiration of ensuring that Malaysia's education system will produce world-class human capital. Hence, in 2011, school-based assessment was implemented in primary schools starting with Year 1 students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The new assessment was then implemented for secondary schools in 2012 starting with Form 1 students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

### **1.3 Statement of Problem**

For many years before school-based assessment was implemented, Malaysia has had standardised public examinations. However, the Ministry of Education Malaysia viewed the national assessment system as becoming not only impractical and burdensome but, more importantly, as failing to reflect students' true competence (Hashim et al., 2013). This was brought to the public's attention in the national media with the former Malaysian Director-General of Education, Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor, highlighting that excessive attention directed towards examinations and grades has taken away students' time and opportunity to further develop their talents, abilities and potential ("Taksu peperiksaan punca pelajar tidak capai inovasi maksimum," 2005). Hence, a more holistic assessment, namely, school-based assessment, was implemented.

Following the implementation of school-based assessment in 2011 and 2012 for primary schools and secondary schools, respectively, several studies were conducted on school-based assessment topic. Among the issues highlighted were: teachers' struggles with implementation of school-based assessment (Omar & Sinnasamy, 2009); teachers' perspectives on school-based assessment (Majid, 2011; Malakolunthu & Hoon, 2010); teachers' readiness (Othman, Md Salleh, & Mohd Norani, 2013; Samsudin, Rengasamy, Jizat, Wahid, & Jalil, 2014); teachers' preparation for the implementation process (Abdullah, Idris, Hamzah, & Sembak, 2015; Leong & Rethinasamy, 2020); and teachers' understanding of the school-based assessment system (Arumugham & Abdullah, 2016). The challenges that teachers are facing are expected when new approaches are introduced to align with mandates and assessment theories (DeLuca, Valiquette, Coombs, LaPointe-McEwan, & Luhanga, 2018). Overall, teachers are struggling with carrying out school-based assessment before, during and after class. These struggles range across teachers coming into class with different understandings of school-based assessment compared to their peers, through having insufficient time to carry out assessment, to recording and reporting the assessment in the prepared platform as instructed by the Ministry.

To date, insufficient in-depth study has been conducted on school-based assessment in primary schools focusing, in particular, on the practice of early literacy assessment in the classroom. Most existing studies have focused more on teachers' understanding and knowledge of, and readiness to carry out, school-based assessment. Bokhari, Md Rashid and Swee Heng (2015) asserted that only a limited amount of research has been done on English language literacy among primary school students in Malaysia. The previous studies conducted have mainly used quantitative methods which provided an overview of the whole situation. However, these explorations were

not in-depth compared to what can be achieved with the qualitative method (Majid, 2011; Omar & Sinnasamy, 2009; Othman et al., 2013; Samsudin et al., 2014). Consequently, the lack of in-depth study, as well as the diversity of school-based assessment implementation in the Malaysian context, indicated a gap in the literature.

Findings in these studies indicated a gap in research on that aspect of practice whereby, although some studies revealed positive reactions towards school-based assessment, teachers still did not fully understand the school-based assessment concept; thus, they carried it out for the sake of fulfilling the directives without following the guidelines provided (Majid, 2011; Malakolunthu & Hoon, 2010; Omar & Sinnasamy, 2009; Samsudin et al., 2014). Malakolunthu and Hoon (2010) also emphasised that, for school-based assessment to be conducted successfully and effectively, it is important that teachers have a good understanding of the assessment. Although teachers showed positive attitudes towards the implementation of school-based assessment, Omar and Sinnasamy (2009) suggested that further research was required to determine how effective school-based assessment implementation was in the classroom. In addition, Che Musa, Lie and Azman (2012) affirmed that further study needed to be done to investigate the pedagogical practice of English lessons in the Malaysian context, while evaluating the development of teachers' knowledge in this domain.

Although previous studies have researched on school-based assessment, none of the studies have explored the practice of early literacy assessment within the school-based assessment context in the Malaysian setting. Thus, the need for this area of research is emphasised, with Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani and Alkalbani (2012) stressing the importance of having a complete comprehension of teachers' attitudes, competence, knowledge and assessment practices which would be reflected in the

effectiveness of classroom assessment. Students' academic success throughout school is based on their early acquisition of literacy (Meeks, Madelaine, & Stephenson, 2020). Students who are able to acquire a good level of literacy early in their schooling tend to perform better in school, thus having a higher employability rate, allowing them to participate in and contribute to society (Meeks et al., 2020; Park, Chaparro, Preciado, & Cummings, 2015). In Malaysia, Selangor has the highest literacy rate at 98.1%, a rate higher than the national average at 95% (Aziz, 2019). It is thus fitting that the current study is carried out in Selangor. This study intends to examine the methods of early literacy assessment and to identify teachers' perceptions of the use of those assessment methods in the ESL (English as a second language) classroom.

Overall, the implementation of school-based assessment is relatively new in the context of the Malaysian education system, thus explaining the paucity of studies in various areas related to school-based assessment. Therefore, it is timely and imperative that this study examines the methods of assessment in the ESL classroom and that it identifies teachers' perceptions towards the use of school-based assessment in relation to the practice of early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the methods of assessment in the ESL classroom at two selected national primary schools;
2. To identify teachers' perceptions towards the use of school-based assessment in relation to the practice of early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

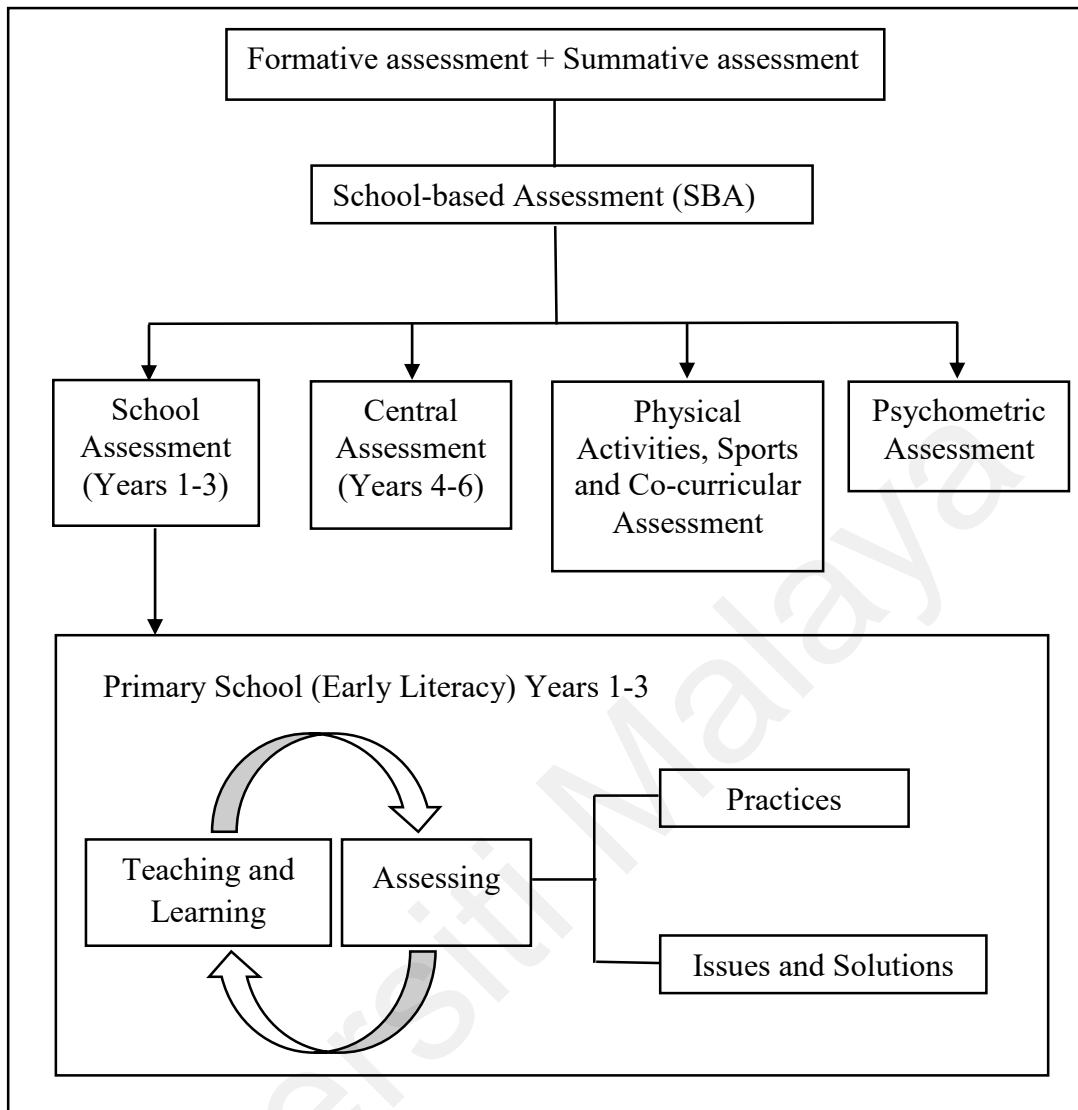
Based on the research objectives stated above, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the methods of early literacy assessment practised by teachers in ESL classrooms at primary school level?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of using school-based assessment in early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms?

## **1.6 Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in Figure 1.1 below represents the changes in assessment in the Malaysian education system and the selected aspects to be studied under school-based assessment implementation.





**Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy Assessment in Malaysian Primary Schools**

As previously mentioned, the assessment system in Malaysian schools was conducted with examinations, that is, school examinations and major examinations at the national level, with the UPSR, the PMR and the SPM being examples. With this examination-oriented assessment being summative in nature, it used a standard traditional examination to assess students' academic performance (Arumugham & Abdullah, 2016). Hasim and Tunku Mohtar (2013) affirmed that the drawbacks of the Malaysian education system were due to the emphasis on examination-oriented teaching and summative evaluation. Following the Government Transformation Plan

(GTP), the Ministry of Education Malaysia revamped the national assessment system by having formative assessment and incorporating school-based assessment in the national education assessment system. The transformation began in 2011 as Malaysia's examination-oriented assessment was changed to the school-based assessment system. This directly reflected the changes from summative assessment to formative assessment.

Under the school-based assessment implementation, the Ministry of Education Malaysia set the following four aspects to be included under school-based assessment: School Assessment; Central Assessment; Physical Activities, Sports and Co-curricular Assessment; and Psychometric Assessment. However, in the current study, only the School Assessment aspect will be covered. School Assessment allows teachers to have autonomy in assessing students according to the guidelines and objectives set by the Ministry. Moreover, under the School Assessment aspect, the current study examines teaching and assessment in another box to show a different context, that of early literacy in the primary school context. Hasim and Tunku Mohtar (2013) suggested that much information could be gathered from the assessment of teaching and learning if the assessment was integrated within the teaching and learning process. As teaching and learning, along with assessment, go hand in hand with each other, the researcher has presented these elements as intertwined. Although these two elements are closely related, the researcher has outlined two different aspects within the element of assessment, namely, teachers' practice of early literacy assessment, and the issues and solutions related to assessment, both of which are based on the research objectives and research questions outlined earlier in this chapter.

## 1.7 Definition of Terms

The terms defined in this section are based on those used in the conceptual framework above.

### 1.7.1 Assessment

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defined assessment as “the act of judging or deciding the amount, value, quality, or importance of something, or the judgment or decision that is made” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2019). In the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Network’s Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (INNOTECH) Research Update (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014), Harlen (2008) and Mertler (2009) defined the term ‘assessment’ in a more summative manner as “the processes that teachers use to assign grades to students in [a] particular subject or assignment”. On the other hand, Black and Wiliam (1998) explained assessment in a more formative manner as “any activity intended to gather information to be used to provide feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in schools or to improve the instruction and students’ performance”. Taras (2005), in a slightly different stance, referred to ‘assessment’ as a judgment which can be justified according to a specific set of goals using either comparative or numerical ratings. However, for the current study, the researcher has adopted the definition introduced by Black and Wiliam (1998) as it is believed to be more suitable for the study’s context. By using Black and Wiliam’s (1998) definition, the researcher can look into the practices and strategies used to collect information on students’ progress and recommend ways in which to improve teachers’ instructions for a better learning and assessment process.

### **1.7.2 Early Literacy**

Few definitions are available for the term ‘early literacy’. ZERO TO THREE (2003) included reading and writing as literacy skills which start to develop “in the first three years of life and [are] closely linked to a child’s earliest experiences with books and stories” (p. 1). The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2014) provided a broader definition of literacy as “a holistic skill that includes talking, listening, visual literacies such as viewing, drawing and critical thinking – not just reading and writing” (p. 1). Furthermore, this definition acknowledges and introduces the use of technology in early literacy development. Meanwhile, the Government of South Australia defined the term ‘literacy’ relatively as “a set of cultural practices situated in sociocultural contexts and is defined by members of a group through their actions with, through and about language” (p. 12). French (2013) referred to literacy, as defined by the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, as “the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media” (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 32). Therefore, the researcher has adopted the definition of literacy, as stated by the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, for this study of students from Years 1–3 in two selected national primary schools in Malaysia.

### **1.8 Significance of Study**

Changes are constant in the Malaysian education system. These changes include the implementation of new programmes to address current national educational issues, particularly those on assessment which many claimed was too examination oriented. This orientation has led to negligence in developing students’ potential while, at the same time, the illiteracy rates in certain states are still high (Hashim et al., 2013; Chen,

2012). Although previous studies have been conducted on school-based assessment within the Malaysian context, most were focused on teachers' readiness and knowledge, and were carried out in different states in Malaysia and at different school levels, and used the quantitative approach. Therefore, few studies have been conducted on the various diverse aspects of school-based assessment in Malaysia, especially in the context of early literacy assessment.

This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the current practice of early literacy assessment by primary school teachers in Malaysia. Concurrently, it provides a clear picture of the situation with teachers and students in Selangor with regard to whether they are thriving in the system. Within the community of practice, teachers may refer to the study's findings on what practices may and may not work and test them in their own classrooms. Furthermore, teachers could also relate to the issues identified in this study regarding assessing students' early literacy. The community of practice may also learn solutions that other teachers have tried and can attempt to apply these ideas in their classrooms. In Ireland, issues and considerations related to early learning assessment are viewed as imperative and are addressed to promote coherence between curriculum and assessment in achieving the curriculum's objectives (Dunphy, 2010). Malaysia shares this view of the importance of the interrelationship between curriculum and assessment and addresses these issues with evidence from the many initiatives undertaken by the Ministry, within policy and by schools. However, despite the increasing number of initiatives undertaken to date, the paucity of research in the academic literature needs to be addressed with further support and enhancement for current initiatives. In essence, this study is not limited to the benefit of teachers alone but is also intended to shed some light for policy makers on what is stagnant within the system and what differences could be made with the

study's findings. This research attempts to provide an in-depth exploration of the early literacy assessment practices in selected primary schools in Malaysia, thus enriching the research of early literacy assessment within school-based assessment in the Malaysian context.

### **1.9 Limitations of Study**

With the implementation of school-based assessment still recent in Malaysia, few past studies have investigated some aspects in school-based assessment, particularly in primary schools. This is particularly evident in the aspect of assessing early literacy within school-based assessment context. Due to the lack of diversified and in-depth studies on the assessment of early literacy in Malaysian primary schools, particularly the school-based assessment aspect, this posed a challenge for the researcher in obtaining sufficient information on the subject matter. Nevertheless, the researcher was not hindered from accessing international resources and examples of practices implemented in other countries. With reliable international resources from other countries, the researcher believes this study can be guided to rich findings that may help to improve the assessment practices in Malaysia's education system.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

The literature review for this study is guided by the conceptual framework designed and presented in the previous chapter. It begins by reviewing the literature on what constitutes assessment and evaluation. This is followed by discussion on, and definitions of, formative and summative assessment that form the basis of the study. The theories of assessment are included as a subtopic in which the existing literature on the topic is presented. A detailed review covers the literature on school-based assessment beginning with implementation at the international and national levels. The literature reviewed on school-based assessment in Malaysia encompasses both School Assessment and Central Assessment to relate to the current study. The literature on the teaching of the English language in the Malaysian context is also reviewed. In line with the study's context, that is, early literacy, an in-depth literature review on this topic is also covered in this chapter. The literature on strategies for assessing early literacy and on the types of assessment that could be used to assess students is also reviewed. Lastly, the literature on theories related to early literacy assessment is reviewed as the final subtopic in this chapter.

#### 2.2 Assessment and Evaluation

Essentially, the purpose of any education programme is to facilitate student learning (Hodges, Eames, & Coll, 2014). Several scholars have argued in favour of assessment in teaching and learning. Wiliam (2013) argued that teachers can only be certain of the effectiveness of the instruction and that students have achieved the intended learning

outcome through assessment. Hence, assessment is placed as the bridge between teaching and learning. Brookhart (2004) defined assessment, in general, as “collecting information about something to be used for some purpose” (p. 5). In educational assessment, the terms ‘assessment’, ‘evaluation’, ‘measurement’ and ‘testing’ are often used interchangeably and synonymously despite each having its own meaning, significance, approaches and purposes (Adom, Mensah, & Dake, 2020; Fantini, 2018).

### **2.2.1 Assessment**

Assessment is integral to teaching and learning. Traditionally, the purpose of assessment has been to assess students’ progress in learning. Mousavi (2009) defined assessment as “appraising or estimating the level or magnitude of some attribute of a person” (p. 36) which reflects the traditional concept of assessment, that is, to assess students’ knowledge and abilities in learning.

Assessment can be carried out using various strategies in diverse contexts for different purposes (Frank, 2012; McMillan, 2001). It can be done before, during or after teaching and learning, depending on the intended outcome of the assessment. Within the classroom context, assessment is the gathering, interpretation and use of information to aid teachers’ decision making (McMillan, 2001, p. 5). Palomba and Banta (1999) defined assessment as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development” (p. 4). Meanwhile, Hasim and Tunku Mohtar (2013) defined assessment as a “tool in gathering useful information about teaching and learning through an orderly process of inquiry based on a set of purpose that effectively informs the practice and decisions” (p. 3). Amua-Sekyi (2016) defined assessment as the activities in which teachers and students are engaged from which the information obtained is utilised for further improvement in teaching and learning. It is a process in



which information on students' knowledge and abilities is gathered to inform teachers when making decisions about students' performance (Amua-Sekyi, 2016; Malaysian Examination Board, 2014). Assessment is the process of collecting and interpreting the information obtained to assist and inform teachers for the purpose of improving the teaching and learning process.

### **2.2.2 Evaluation**

In one of the earliest studies in the literature with regard to educational assessment, Scriven (1967) described evaluation as "a logical activity where performance data are gathered and combined with a set of goal scales to extract comparative or numerical ratings" (pp. 2-3). In general, evaluation usually involves judgments on the quality of students' performance based on prescriptive standards (Fantini, 2018). Adom et al. (2020) referred to evaluation as the "process to determine the merit, worth, or value of a process or the product of it" (p. 112). Evaluation uses criteria and evidence in its process of making judgments (Adom et al., 2020; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; McMillan, 2001). Evaluation is a process of value judgment which provides accountability to relevant stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, policy makers, education agencies and the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

According to Mathison (2010), the two primary purposes of evaluation within the educational context are accountability and amelioration. Evaluation conducted to fulfil the purpose of accountability has no role during the teaching and learning process as it occurs after the learning process and is meant to be labelled as achievement, making it most often associated with, and occasionally equated to, summative assessment (Mathison, 2010). However, evaluation can also be carried out in a formative manner. Evaluation executed for the purpose of amelioration (or improvement) is often equated with formative assessment as it can be used to improve

learning, to generate insights on educational issues, to promote continuous evaluation and to strengthen programmes and organisations (Mathison, 2010). Evaluation conducted for the purpose of accountability often yields numerical ratings, while evaluation carried out for the purpose of amelioration often yields comparative ratings.

In contrast with Mathison's classification, Catelly (2014) held an abstract view of evaluation. Catelly (2014) believed that evaluation is not only an ongoing process that extends beyond the focus on objectives, but rather that it has the purpose of examining the underlying conditions of learning. On a larger scale, Catelly's (2014) perspectives lead to evaluation being conducted in a more formative manner. In her study to enhance the quality of the language proficiency assessment process, Catelly (2014) affirmed that evaluation should support the enhancement of students' increased responsibility in their learning process. Evaluation should also have a positive influence on designing an effective syllabus to help meet current and future demands (Catelly, 2014). Through this process, evaluation becomes the means to measure students' progress, as well as reflecting the complexity of holistic learning (Catelly, 2014, p. 394).

### **2.3 Formative Assessment and Summative Assessment**

Assessment can be formative or summative. Scriven (1967) coined the terms "formative evaluation" and "summative evaluation" to differentiate between the purposes of improving programmes and judging the merits of programmes, respectively (Crooks, 2011; Wiliam, 2006). The term 'assessment *for* learning (AfL)' is often used interchangeably with formative assessment, while these are in contrast to the term 'assessment of learning (AoL)' which is correspondingly used with summative assessment (Lee, 2007). In the current study, the terms 'formative assessment' and 'summative assessment' are used instead of the terms 'assessment for

learning (AoF)' and 'assessment of learning (AoL). The following subsections further explain what constitutes formative and summative assessment.

### **2.3.1 Formative Assessment**

Various scholars, in attempting to define formative assessment, have described it as an assessment activity conducted in the classroom in which the information gathered is used by teachers or students to provide feedback to modify and improve teaching and learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Black, 2010; Hopster-den Otter, Wools, Eggen, & Veldkamp, 2019) at a time when adjustments are still possible to ensure the achievement of the learning objective (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009).

Students are essentially at the heart of formative assessment (Black, 2010; Harlen & James, 1997; Hopster-den Otter et al., 2019; Wu & Jessop, 2018) with its primary focus and purpose being to promote students' learning. In doing so, formative assessment allows teachers to monitor and improve their instructions in order to achieve improvement in students' learning (McMillan, 2001; Wiliam, 2006; Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008; Chappuis, 2009; DeLuca, Luu, Sun, & Klinger, 2012). Formative assessment is often described as a continuous process in which multiple assessments can be done throughout the learning process (Lee, 2007; Popham, 2008; DeLuca et al., 2012). The purpose of conducting formative assessment during a teaching and learning session is to enable teachers to identify specific students' misunderstandings in their learning so feedback can be provided and corrections in the instructions can be identified and implemented (Cauley & McMillan, 2010). An essential feature of formative assessment is that the evidence obtained is interpreted according to students' learning needs and is used to make improvements in order to meet those learning needs (Wiliam, 2006).

Black (2010) proposed the following three aspects of formative assessment that involve all three agents (teacher, peer and learner: (1) where the learner is going; (2) where the learner is right now; and 3) how to get there. Within these aspects, formative assessment is conceptualised as having the following five key strategies:

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. Providing feedback that moves students forward;
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another; and
5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning.

(Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 8)

Black and Wiliam (2009) suggested that, in order to achieve these five key strategies, activities that could be carried out in the classroom include questioning, comment-only marking, and peer- and self-assessment activities. Wareing (2010) believed that assessment should not be solely about measuring students' capability or understanding, but that it could also be used to assist learning by requiring reflection on what works and what does not work in the classroom. Wareing (2010) outlined the five key stages for assessment as follows: (1) learning intentions are clarified, understood and shared; (2) effective classroom discussions, tasks and activities are engineered to elicit learning evidence; (3) feedback is provided to ensure students' improvement; (4) students are activated as learning resources for one another; and (5) students take charge of their own learning actively (Wareing, 2010, p. 8). Setting clear learning objectives, using effective questioning and providing feedback are among the list of strategies in implementing formative assessment suggested by Wareing (2010).

Formative assessment is flexible; it is neither unstructured nor fixed (Chappuis, 2009). It is often carried out during the teaching and learning process (Lee, 2007; Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009; Cauley & McMillan, 2010; DeLuca et al., 2012). Formative assessment can be both formal and informal assessment processes used to elicit evidence to improve students' learning (Chappuis, 2009).

#### **A. Instructional Strategies in Formative Assessment**

In Riley-Ayers (2014), suggestions were included from Riley-Ayers, Stevenson-Garcia, Frede and Breneman (2012) on the role of teachers as participant-observers engaged in the iterative process. These suggestions include: observing and investigating students' individual behaviours; documenting and reflecting on the evidence obtained; analysing and evaluating the data in relation to setting goals or learning directions; hypothesising and planning in response to what students are demonstrating, with implications for instructions; and using data to help guide and instruct, targeting students' needs and scaffolding their learning. Similarly, the Iowa Department of Education listed several strategies, inclusive of formal and informal strategies, that may be used to monitor students' progress. These strategies include observations, embedded questions, probes, ungraded quizzes and scoring guides. The importance of the nature of assessment and information delivery is not to be taken lightly as these could affect the quality of formative assessment (McCallum & Milner, 2020).

Garrison and Ehringhaus (2009) listed several instructional strategies that can be used formatively. These strategies are: creating clear instructions and engaging students with the criteria and goal setting for the learning session; conducting observations to identify if students need help and to assist teachers in informing their instructional planning; developing better questioning strategies to encourage students

to think critically; having self- and peer assessment for students to be more involved in their learning and so they understand the quality of work required; and having student record keeping so students can envision their progress starting from where they are currently.

## **B. Feedback in Formative Assessment**

Formative assessment is interactive due to the interaction between teacher and student. Feedback, the element of exchanging information, is a central component of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Black, 2010). It should encourage students to be introspective in their learning and assist them with ways to change and improve their work (Chappuis, 2009). Feedback obtained from evidence should be used to modify instructions, thus shifting the way in which students learn (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009).

Within the context of the classroom, feedback as dialogue means that students are not only involved as recipients of information, but are also given the opportunity to engage teachers in the discussion (Laurillard, 2002), thus enabling deeper learning (Amua-Sekyi, 2016) which ultimately supports the previously mentioned primary focus of formative assessment.

By offering feedback that focuses on developing students' skills, understanding and mastery, as well as embracing their errors as a learning opportunity, the feedback is more effective and gives students hope and positive expectations for themselves to achieve learning targets (Cauley & McMillan, 2010). It is imperative that teachers provide effective and constructive feedback to students (Chappuis, 2009). This is in line with a further explanation on feedback by Black and Wiliam (2009) in which they asserted that good feedback is about exploiting "moments of contingencies" to regulate the learning process, thereby supporting the purpose of formative assessment.

In giving feedback, it is best for teachers to avoid comparing students' work with that of other students to ensure the preservation of the fundamental trait of formative assessment and to promote learning (Chappuis, 2009; Harlen & James, 1997). It is possible for teachers to obtain information from students' answers or through "quick-and-quiet" feedback, that is, when teachers walk around the classroom to check on the progress of students' work (Cauley & McMillan, 2010).

Taras (2005) stated that an assessment needs feedback to show the gap between the current level and the required standard and, as it is a formative assessment, an indication of how it can be improved. As Wiliam (2006) concurred, an assessment is formative and responsive when the information obtained is used to make changes. Formative assessment is responsive as the evidence elicited from students is used by teachers to modify their instructions to improve students' learning (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008; Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009; Wiliam, 2011). Students should be given the opportunity to explore their understanding, to think and to express their ideas as a way of encouraging learning (Chappuis, 2009). In this way, formative assessment allows students to be empowered in their own learning. Not only are they given the opportunity to be involved in their learning, it also requires them to be able to self-assess (Marsh, 2007).

Attributing students' success and mastery to moderate effort places students in control, resulting in their attribution of what is needed to be highly effective and influencing them by suggesting that they are capable of learning (Cauley & McMillan, 2010). Indeed, students should be encouraged to self-assess to help them focus on self-monitoring (Cauley & McMillan, 2010). Formative assessment requires students to be active learners, while progression requires them to have an adequate understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (Harlen & James, 1997). Chappuis (2009) emphasised

the need for students to be trained in how to undertake self-assessment so they can comprehend the primary purpose of their learning and understand what they need to achieve.

William (2006) noted that Scriven (1967) and Bloom (1969) distinguished the essential feature of formative assessment as being the information obtained and used to make changes. Assessment is formative if the information used is beneficial for improvement and shapes whatever is being evaluated, curriculum development and the student's learning (William, 2006). He asserted that when evidence is evoked and interpreted in terms of learning needs, it is used to make adjustments to meet those learning needs. Nevertheless, how formative assessment is defined and operationalised is dependent on how it is being used (Cauley & McMillan, 2010).

### **2.3.2 Summative Assessment**

As with formative assessment, scholars have provided various definitions of summative assessment based on their understanding. Scriven (1967) believed that summative assessment measures the overall value of the programme. Taras (2005) referred to summative assessment as a final judgment derived from evidence for a certain period of time. The Assessment Reform Group (2006) described summative assessment as

a process by which teachers gather evidence in a planned and systematic way in order to draw inferences about their students' learning, based on their professional judgment, and to report their students' achievements at a particular time. (p. 4)

Garrison and Ehringhaus (2009) claimed that summative assessments are undertaken periodically at a particular time to determine what students know and do not know. They usually take place once the learning is completed to provide information and feedback with this comprising the teaching and learning process. Once summative



assessment is carried out, no additional formal learning takes place to improve the next result as this form of assessment only summarises the learning over a certain period of time.

The Assessment Reform Group (2006) stated that the purpose of summative assessment is to summarise for reporting purposes what students know or are able to do. Summative assessment is used to obtain information in order to judge or reflect upon the overall value of a programme (Bennett, 2011). This is supported by Cauley and McMillan (2010) when they stated that summative assessment only records evidence of a student's current achievement. Durga and Balaji Kumar (2020) argued that despite summative assessment being able to record students' achievement on a numerical scale (F. Ahmed, Ali, & Shah, 2019), its impact on learning is diminutive. The definition of summative assessment is not as varied as that of formative assessment. That being said, to summarise, summative assessment is the process of recording and reporting students' achievement from information obtained periodically, or at the end of a lesson (F. Ahmed et al., 2019; Assessment Reform Group, 2006; Bennett, 2011; Cauley & McMillan, 2010; Taras, 2005).

The Assessment Reform Group (2006) claimed that the information obtained from summative assessment is a summary of what the students know or are able to do at a certain period of time as a progress and achievement report. According to Harlen and James (1997), summative assessment takes place only at certain intervals when achievement has to be reported. They added that it is related to learning progression measured against public criteria. Summative assessment needs to have some quality assurance methods which must be as reliable as possible without compromising the assessment's validity (Harlen & James, 1997). It is important to note that summative assessment should be based on evidence from the full range of performance related to

the imposed criteria, and that the results for different students may be combined for various purposes as they are based on the same criteria (Harlen & James, 1997). Daugherty (2010) concurred by highlighting the following four crucial features of summative assessment: “systematic, occurring within the system; requires teachers to draw inferences from evidence they have collected; calls for teachers to exercise their judgement and involves some form of report on student achievement” (p. 384).

#### **A. Instructional Strategies in Summative Assessment**

Garrison and Ehringhaus (2009) listed some instructional strategies for summative assessment, namely, examinations, term papers, students’ evaluations of the course and instructors’ self-evaluation. Other examples of summative assessment include end-of-unit tests or projects, course grades, standardised assessments and portfolios. Course grades provide the teacher with information on how well a student has met the overall expectations for a particular course. Meanwhile, a standardised assessment that accurately reflects the state performance and content standards indicates how many students are achieving the established grade-level expectations. Portfolios can also be used to provide evidence to support the achievement of the stated learning objectives.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2000) defined the term ‘validity’ as being how well the assessment can measure what it aims to measure. Meanwhile, the term ‘reliability’ refers to the consistency of the results (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2000). Rolfe and McPherson (1995) asserted that instruments used for summative assessment need to have both validity and reliability.

#### **2.3.3 Comparing Formative Assessment and Summative Assessment**

In essence, the two most significant elements that distinguish formative assessment from summative assessment are the purpose of the information obtained

from the assessment and when the assessment is conducted in the teaching and learning process. It is important to note how the information is obtained and how the assessment result is used to determine whether an assessment is formative or summative (Harlen, 2006; Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008; Black, 2010).

From the literature review, it can be deduced that formative assessment occurs when information for the assessment can be obtained throughout the teaching and learning process, with this used by both students and teachers to modify and improve teaching to promote students' learning. On the other hand, summative assessment occurs when information for the assessment is obtained at the end of a lesson or at specific intervals and is recorded and reported as a judgment on students' achievements.

The strategies for assessing students also differ between formative and summative assessment. The types of assessment often used for formative assessment are those that give students and teachers the opportunity to act on the feedback provided. This includes observation, homework exercises, questioning, in-class activities and feedback (Tapper-Jones, Houston, & Stott, 1993). Meanwhile, high-stakes summative assessments are often given to students to determine and allocate grades which indicate their ability level. Examples of types of summative assessment include examinations, tests, projects, portfolios and course evaluation.

In conclusion, as Popham (2008) affirmed, it is not the nature of the assessment that gives a label to an assessment, but how the result of the assessment is utilised.

## **2.4 Assessment Theories**

Whittington (2007) noted that an assessment theory examines and explains the nature and process of assessment or its purpose. Referring to this statement, the above

explanations on formative and summative assessment thus reflect the theory of assessment, as agreed by Black and Wiliam (2009), Sadler (1989) and Taras (2007).

James (2006) presented three theoretical foundations of learning, namely, 'behaviourist', 'constructivist' and 'sociocultural' or 'activist'. In her research, she stated that these foundations are "based on a view of what learning is and how it takes place" and "they do not necessarily claim to have a view about the implications for the construction of learning environments, for teaching, or for assessment" (p. 6). She thus implied that no assessment theory exists per se and suggested implications for teaching and assessment in relation to the theory.

#### **2.4.1 Behaviourist Theory**

In behaviourist theory, the learning environment is a determining factor. According to Reimann (2018), learning is a process through which experiences result in permanent changes in behaviour. The fundamental principle is that students learn through conditioning by responding to stimuli using the concept of rewards and punishments (James, 2006; Reimann, 2018). Conditioning, as further iterated by Reimann (2018), is a stimulus that is repeated with the same result to reinforce a response. In relation to learning, achievement is "equated with accumulation of skills and memorisation of facts, demonstrated in the formation of habits that allow speedy performance" (James, 2006, p. 7). Basic skills are introduced prior to complex skills. A key element of learning under this theory is observation which can either reinforce or challenge and dispel previous knowledge. The successful exchange of communication as positive reinforcement supports learning behaviour, while behaviours which result in negative reinforcement could have an adverse impact on learning (Reimann, 2018). In this aspect, the role of teachers is to train students to correctly respond to instructions in a timely manner (James, 2006). The implications

for assessment under this theory, as argued by James (2006), is that students' performance is interpreted as right or wrong, with remedies provided to poorly performing students so they can improve their performance. In relation to formative assessment, teachers often use observation to informally assess students' progress in learning, and with feedback received from students, teachers can identify if students are ready to proceed or if improvement in the instructions is required to achieve the desired outcome.

#### **2.4.2 Cognitive Theory**

Cognitive theory involves the mental process of gaining and processing knowledge (James, 2006; Muhajirah, 2020). In learning, active engagement is expected from students to display how students construct meaning, that is, understanding through their senses, solving problems, etc. (James, 2006; Muhajirah, 2020). The tenet under this theory, in comparison with behaviourist theory, is that students have the faculty to measure the environment; thus, they are not directly affected by the situation (Muhajirah, 2020). In this aspect, teachers, by being facilitators and mediators of learning, are expected to assist students to progress from their status of a beginner to becoming an expert, ensuring that they are able to grasp and process concepts and information in problem solving (James, 2006; Muhajirah, 2020). Thus, formative assessment is crucial in teaching and learning as it allows teachers to scaffold students' existing knowledge and to "elicit students' mental models" so students have the opportunity to further explore their understanding (James, 2006). This can be achieved by methods including classroom discussions and open-ended assignments. Therefore, in this aspect, students' achievements are situated within the parameters of their faculty, that is, their understanding in relation to conceptual structures and their competence in processing strategies (James, 2006).

This also includes self-monitoring and self-regulation, both of which are components of metacognition. The strategies applicable under cognitive theory allow students to be introspective and to self-assess their own progress, with their responses in discussion developing their understanding, thus reflecting the elements of formative assessment.

### **2.4.3 Sociocultural Theory**

In sociocultural theory, learning happens in interactions between a student and their social environment, and often with more able peers such as teachers and parents (James, 2006; Panhwar, Ansari, & Ansari, 2016). Learning occurs when students develop their thinking during social and collaborative activities which means students' participation is required in the learning process (James, 2006). Learning is a mediated activity, which refers to students' adoption and use of tools to achieve their learning targets (James, 2006; Rahmatirad, 2020). Therefore, within the classroom context, the role of teachers is to create an environment which encourages students to think and act beyond their current level of competence (James, 2006). It is crucial that the tasks designed are authentic and collaborative in nature with sufficient 'scaffolding' to encourage students' engagement in problem solving (James, 2006; Panhwar et al., 2016; Rahmatirad, 2020). Due to its collaborative characteristic, the knowledge gained by students is shared within their social environment. James (2006) highlighted that, under sociocultural theory, judgment needs to be holistic and consistent with the approach used and self-assessment should be central. Learning outcomes can be captured and reported in various forms including through the use of audio-visual and visual media (James, 2006).

To achieve the objectives of the current study, the most relevant assessment theory is formative and summative assessment, as presented in Section 2.3 (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Sadler, 1989; Taras, 2007; Whittington, 2007).

## **2.5 School-based Assessment (SBA)**

School-based assessment has been implemented in various countries. The subsection below provides a glimpse of how school-based assessment is implemented in selected countries.

### **2.5.1 School-based Assessment (SBA): International**

Several developed countries, such as Hong Kong, Finland, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England, have implemented school-based assessment in their education system. However, each country has a different way of executing the system to suit its national needs and objectives.

#### **A. Hong Kong**

School-based assessment in Hong Kong was implemented for several reasons, with the two main reasons being to improve the validity and reliability of assessments (Hill & Tak-Wing, 2006). With multiple observations over an extended period of time, school assessments provide a highly reliable assessment compared to their one-time examination results (Hill & Tak-Wing, 2006). In addition, school-based assessment offers “the prospect of a positive backwash effect on the teaching and learning with greater emphasis on student-centred learning and focuses less on drilling for examination, and reducing the pressure due to examination” (Hill & Tak-Wing, 2006).

## **B. Scotland**

According to Wright (2001), the school-based assessment system in Scotland supports the combination of internal and external moderation with each carrying a specific purpose. The objective for internal moderation is to ensure that school staff make consistent decisions in line with assessment criteria, as defined by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) (Wright, 2001). The SQA has also provided guidelines on best practice for internal moderation (Wright, 2001). Although internal moderation is carried out by school staff, external moderation is conducted by SQA-appointed moderators (Wright, 2001). This serves to ensure that internal assessment is on par with the national standard, as set in the qualifications.

Grima (2003) explained that moderation is executed by direct inspection of samples of students' completed work. She then confirmed that the sample size for moderation in a school comprised 12 candidates. Grima (2003) clarified that two main approaches were used, namely, central moderation and visiting moderation. According to this author, central moderation is used when the work is easy to transport and the process skills are evident, whereas visiting moderation is used for subjects that have heavy or ephemeral products or that are based on performance.

## **C. New Zealand**

Grima (2003) shared one of the success stories of school-based assessment implementation, explaining that schools are primarily responsible for the quality of their assessment decisions. According to her, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is "responsible for checking a sample of assessment decisions and assisting the schools to improve internal systems" (p. 9). Each school has an assessment policy and is expected to have internal policies and procedures on



documented assessment (Grima, 2003). Lennox (2001) further explained that the NZQA would collect samples annually from every school of assessed students' work in each subject, including their assessment activities and schedules. These works are then checked by a national network of moderators, most of whom are practising teachers, with their reports indicating how well the school is doing in meeting the national standards in each subject (Grima, 2003).

### **2.5.2 School-based Assessment (SBA) in Malaysia**

Before school-based assessment was implemented, Malaysia's education system used the Integrated Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) and the Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSM) as the curricula for primary and secondary schools, respectively. According to Lee (1999), the old primary curriculum was replaced with the KBSR for several reasons which included: the old primary curriculum was too subject content-based; too much emphasis was placed on rote learning; it was excessively dependent on textbooks; and it was too examination oriented. Ironically, approximately 29 years after the KBSR was implemented, Malaysia's education system went through another change for similar reasons to those that inspired the initial change. The now former Deputy Prime Minister, at that time also the Minister of Education, Hj. Muhyiddin Hj. Mohd Yassin, emphasised that school-based assessment would provide opportunities for students to develop their potential and become more creative and innovative through continuous assistance from teachers.

In a statement from the former General Director of Education, Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor, as quoted by Hashim et al. (2013), the following points were made:

The attitude of being too obsessed with too many standardised examinations in the national education system is the main obstacle in achieving [the] maximum level of creativity and innovation. Too many

examinations at the primary, secondary, and university levels have reduced the time for students to develop their talents, abilities, and potentials in their areas of interest. (p. 2)

The following four main reasons were given as to why school-based assessment was introduced:

- i. To enhance meaningful assessment;
- ii. To reduce the over-reliance on data (grades and scores);
- iii. To empower schools and teachers to conduct quality assessment of students;
- iv. To ensure that students' performance is comparable to world standards in various areas.

The Ministry of Education Malaysia thus introduced school-based assessment as a more holistic, integrated, and balanced form of assessment as part of the Government Transformation Plan (GTP) in the effort to produce world-class human capital (Raman & Yamat, 2014). The transformation was implemented in 2011 for primary school and in 2012 for secondary school. School-based assessment is a holistic form of assessment which assesses students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects in parallel with the National Education Philosophy and the Primary School Standard Co-curriculum (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011; Abdullah et al., 2015).

To further assist others to gain an understanding of the school-based assessment concept, Hasim and Tunku Mohtar (2013) explained that it is in line with the humanising assessment concept. This basic idea, taken from the Malaysian Examination Board (2007), was that assessment was to be seen as an integral part of the curriculum, fulfilling purposes, such as fostering learning, improving teaching, providing valid information on what was done or achieved, and allowing students to make sensible and rational choices on their courses, careers and other matters.

Although many perceived school-based assessment to be formative assessment, it includes summative assessment as it is a holistic assessment (Malaysian Examination Board, 2012; Jaba, Hamzah, Bakar, Rashid, 2013; Abdullah et al., 2015). Students are assessed both formatively through School Assessment and summatively through Central Assessment.

The four components in school-based assessment are: School Assessment; Central Assessment; Physical Activities, Sports and Co-curricular Assessment; and Psychometric Assessment (Mohd Yusof, 2013). The two components on which this study focuses are School Assessment and Central Assessment.

#### **A. School Assessment**

According to the *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025*, School Assessment refers to written examinations that measure students' level of learning for a particular subject. The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) stated that School Assessment functions as an assessment *for* learning and an assessment *of* learning which can be carried out either formatively or summatively (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Formative assessment is a continuous activity that can be carried out alongside the learning and teaching process, with teachers using instruments such as worksheets, observation, quizzes, check lists, report assignments, homework and tests (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) also stated that the formative assessment reporting system is based on statement evidence used as proof of the assessments of students' achievements. Meanwhile, summative assessment is carried out at the end of each learning unit through monthly and semester tests (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The summative assessment reporting

format, as described by the Malaysian Examination Board (2011), is descriptor evidence used for reporting students' achievements.

In total, 19 subjects are listed for School Assessment for Level 1 (Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3) students, while 21 subjects are listed for School Assessment for Level 2 (Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6) students (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) has established that teachers are responsible for planning, creating, administering, checking, recording and reporting the assessments conducted. The collected evidence comprises materials or evidence shown by students as proof of task completion (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Some examples are writing, performance, photos, graphics, artefacts and reports. Teachers must abide by the established method of managing the evidence through exercise books and appropriate worksheets, while artefacts are to be returned to students after recording and giving feedback, as these will comprise the best evidence to be showcased.

School Assessment, as asserted by the Malaysian Examination Board (2011), is the main component in the process of teaching and learning. Its role is to enhance students' learning, improve teachers' teaching, provide valid information on what was carried out or achieved in the teaching and learning process, and determine the teachers' and school's effectiveness in producing harmonious and balanced human beings.

The main features of School Assessment are that it is: (1) holistic which means that it can provide overall information on the achievement of knowledge and skills and the practice of values; (2) continuous with the assessment carried out during teaching and learning; (3) flexible which allows for various assessment methods to be conducted according to students' suitability and preparation; and (4) in reference to

the Performance Standard created based on the curriculum standard (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011).

### ***Performance Standard***

The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) defined the Performance Standard as a statement that explains an individual's achievement or mastery in a field after going through a period of learning based on the benchmark description. The Performance Standard guides the assessor in carrying out the assessment justly while focusing on the standards designated, as it also becomes the main reference for everyone involved in the assessment directly or indirectly (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). With the Performance Standard, students know clearly what they need to master or achieve, what is assessed and the quality expected in an assessment, while teachers know the objectives that need to be achieved in school, what will be assessed and the quality that every student needs to have. In addition, parents find out what has been mastered or achieved by their children after they have gone through a certain period of the education process. Stakeholders can understand the curriculum and the national education system's aspirations and goals as well as the qualities that can be found within students, as manifested through the education system (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). In Table 2.1 below, the framework for the Performance Standard, as described by the Malaysian Examination Board (2011) is presented.

**Table 2.1**

*Performance Standard Framework (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011)*

<b>BAND</b>	<b>STANDARD</b>
6	Know, understand and able to do in an exemplary manner
5	Know, understand and able to do in an admirable manner
4	Know, understand and able to do in a systematic manner
3	Know, understand and able to do
2	Know and understand
1	Know

In Band 1, students know the basics or can perform basic skills or provide a response to the basics. In Band 2, students can illustrate their understanding by changing the form of communication or by interpreting and explaining what was learnt. In Band 3, students can apply their knowledge to use a certain skill in a certain situation. In Band 4, students can systematically apply a certain skill or to implement it according to procedure or systematically. In Band 5, students systematically implement a certain skill in new situations by following the procedure or system systematically, consistently and positively. In Band 6, students are described as being able to illustrate ideas creatively and innovatively, having the ability to make decisions to adapt to the request and to daily life challenges, and can discuss the request in order to ethically obtain and deliver information using appropriate sentences and consistently following the examples.

**Table 2.2**

*Framework for Performance Standard Document (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011)*

<b>BAND</b>	<b>STANDARD STATEMENT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>EVIDENCE</b>
1	Generic/general explanation on levels of learning achievement (referring to subject's objective)	<b>What</b> students know and can do	<b>How</b> students show what they know and can do
2		(referring to Curriculum Standard for certain years for subjects)	
3			
4			
5			
6			

The Performance Standard for certain subjects is used from Year 1 to Year 6 as this statement was drafted based on the objective for that subject. The descriptor refers to the things that students should know and can do based on the learning standards that are etched in the Curriculum Standard for that particular subject, with these differing for each learning year (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The statement evidence refers to the statement that explains how students demonstrate what they know and do, in which quality also refers to the aspects that can be implemented and administered (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) explained evidence as materials or any form of evidence that demonstrate students' ability to carry out a task. Evidence can be in the form of a product or a process (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Teachers are advised to be creative in choosing a task and they can use various types of assessment instrument, such as written tests, demonstrations or quizzes, to test students' mastery or achievement for a certain domain (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011).

The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) explained the implementation of the Performance Standard in School Assessment. According to the Examination Board, teachers' preparation begins by preparing what to teach by choosing the content of the subject based on the Curriculum Standard Document. Teachers plan the teaching method, prepare the teaching materials and, thus, deliver the content using various strategies according to teachers' creativity (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Teachers then interpret students' understanding of what was taught through various strategies and use appropriate instruments to conduct the assessment which can also be done informally (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Teachers then refer to the Performance Standard document to record students' achievement and if students achieve the standard, teachers may proceed to the next content. However, if the standard is not achieved, teachers must conduct an intervention session to guide students appropriately (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011).

## **B. Central Assessment**

Central Assessment refers to written examinations, project assignments or oral examination (for language subjects) which are used to assess the learning of a subject (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This assessment is only applicable to Level 2 (Years 4, 5 and 6) students and is determined according to the assessment format (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Central Assessment is administered, checked, recorded and reported at school level by teachers based on assignments and rubrics produced by the Malaysian Examination Board within the period prescribed by the subject (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The Examination Board also provided some definitions in their guidelines book to further assist in understanding the process of Central Assessment in the Malaysian school context. *Administering* is defined as



the effort to collect assessment information and is carried out by subject teachers or involved assessors during teaching and learning sessions, with this role including managing the evidence. *Scoring* is the process of giving out scores for the matters being assessed based on the scoring/rubric. *Moderating* is the effort to ensure that students' scores are synchronised for each student in a school and between schools. This mechanism guarantees the trustworthiness and validity of assessment scores. The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) defined validity as being the extent to which an assessment score depicts the relevance and adequacy of coverage of the matter being assessed, based on the Primary School Standard Curriculum (*Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah*) (KSSR) document. Meanwhile, *trustworthiness* refers to accuracy and consistency of assessment scores. Coordination and monitoring can ensure both validity and trustworthiness. According to the Malaysian Examination Board (2011), based on the designated framework, this assessment can be done continuously during teaching and learning sessions. Examples of evidence for this assessment include writing, performance, photos, graphics, artefacts and reports (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). The evidence must be systematically kept in a safe place within a certain period of time and is returned to the student after quality assurance.

Central Assessment has the following characteristics. It is: (1) holistic, being able to give complete information on knowledge and skills achievement, and the practice of values; (2) continuous with the assessment conducted throughout teaching and learning sessions within a certain period; (3) flexible, allowing the assignment to be carried out according to the suitability of the time and the environment; (4) integrated which allows the assignment to be tested in various constructs and contexts; (5) authentic, whereby the assignment refers to a real situation; and (6) refers to a scoring rubric designated for the assignment (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011).

The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) further stated that the objectives for Central Assessment are to assess students' mastery and achievement in the aspects of acquiring knowledge, mastering knowledge and skills, and appreciating values and character. This ensures that the information collected from students is sufficient and accurate by using different instruments to confirm students' mastery in School Assessment through a standardised process.

Implementing Central Assessment involves comprehensive planning at all levels. This includes ensuring that the procedure is uniform and executed to guarantee the justice, validity and trustworthiness of the assessment. The operation for this type of assessment comprises planning, preparing a work schedule, upgrading, standardising and reporting as is explained below.

### ***Planning***

The purpose of planning is to standardise the operational work for Central Assessment so implementation can run smoothly to meet the needs and specifications of the given assignment and to ensure that it is being carried out systematically and in fulfilment of the planned work schedule. This stage involves the Malaysian Examination Board and multiple departments in the Ministry of Education Malaysia, such as the Curriculum Development Department, Special Education Department, Daily School Management Department, State Education Department, District Education Office and other related agencies.

### ***Preparing Work Schedule***

In this stage, a work schedule is prepared that includes information regarding the activities/actions to be conducted, their duration and those involved and/or with responsibilities. Among items that need to be considered in this stage are reminders to students and the required quality of assignments. To ensure that the quality of assignment is maintained, students are not allowed to plagiarise other students' work. Instead, they need to adhere to the fixed assignment production specification and to achieve the level set for that assignment. For the practical assignment format, the presentation/production must be based on the criteria as designated in the subject guidance.

### ***Upgrading***

Upgrading is an effort to ensure that understanding and empathy are present between the interpreter and users so that the scores obtained have a high degree of validity and trustworthiness. The purpose of this stage is to provide knowledge, understanding and empathy relating to the matter that is being interpreted, the referred criteria, the evidence sought, the instruments used and scoring methods.

### ***Standardising***

Standardising is a process used to ensure consistency in the understanding of the rules/scoring scheme/rubric. It is also undertaken from the scoring aspect to ensure that the construct and grade/score scales are uniform, thus increasing the trustworthiness and validity of assessment scores for quality assurance.

## ***Reporting***

Reporting for Central Assessment refers to the summary of scores by the teacher/assessor to obtain the level of students' mastery. This is done based on the designated principal summary. The reported score portrays students' levels of mastery and achievement, with this able to be improved or increased from time to time.

### ***(i) Instruments for Central Assessment***

The Malaysian Examination Board (2011) has listed some instruments that can be used in Central Assessment as set out below:

#### ***Observation***

The process of observation is generally less structured and is usually done to assess students' interaction with each other in carrying out an assignment to obtain consensus. Observations need to be carried out with purpose and using an appropriate observation instrument, such as a check list and/or a rating scale which only requires brief notes and little time for recording to reduce record keeping

#### ***Test***

A test is a type of tool/instrument used to collect information. A more structured, rigid test enables teachers to collect evidence for all students using the same method at the same time. Students can demonstrate the evidence of their learning through this method and the judgment of students' achievements can be carried out through scoring.

### ***Performance***

Performance is a more flexible assignment compared to the test. It involves extensive assignments inclusive of aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes in diverse situations and real contexts. Performance assessment encompasses the practical components of certain subjects along with how students combine the theory with practice.

### ***Self- and Peer Assessment and Group Work***

Self-assessment is a reflection carried out by a student on his/her own learning. Through this type of assessment, students learn how to accurately assess their academic skills and performance with guidance provided by teachers. Peer assessment enables students to assess their peers using a check list or rubric. Meanwhile, group work assessment involves assessing the group's work, including their social skills, time management and group dynamics.

### ***Project***

A project is a form of assessment conducted in a learning activity within a certain period. It usually involves collecting information and report preparation. This assignment can be carried out individually or in groups. A project enables students to integrate their knowledge and interpersonal skills in carrying out the assignment.

### ***Practical Examination***

The purpose of the practical examination instrument is to measure students' ability in applying the knowledge and skills obtained. This examination is evaluated based on the mastery of psychomotor knowledge, manipulative skills, creativity skills and

various self-skills related to the subject. All these skills are evaluated either directly during the examination or based on the evidence portrayed through product creation.

### ***Rubrics***

Rubrics, as defined by the Malaysian Examination Board (2011), is a form of scoring scheme that is established according to criteria and often used for ranking, ranging from weak to excellent. The two types of rubric are the analytic rubric which is a detailed explanation and mark distribution for each point to assess students' work, and the holistic rubric which consists of the criteria and quality used to assess students' overall work (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011). Rubrics provide clear explanations of the requirements to be met in students' work. In this regard, rubrics need to be transparent to enable students to estimate their work performance. At the same time, rubrics increase the validity and trustworthiness of Central Assessment (Malaysian Examination Board, 2011).

## **2.6 English Language Teaching**

In 2003, the Ministry of Education Malaysia announced the policy of using English to teach Mathematics and Science to address concerns about students' poor results in English and also as a means to increase their employment prospects and access to science and technology from Western countries (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). The policy was however reversed in 2012, with the Ministry of Education Malaysia introducing English as the language of the curriculum to improve the teaching of English in 2011, in accordance with this shift (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). The curriculum emphasis on communicating in English in students' interaction has been carried out by: introducing authentic texts in the classroom; providing opportunities

for students to focus on the learning process; making students' own personal experience an important element in learning, and linking classroom language learning with language activities outside the four walls of the classroom (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014).

The teaching of the English language in the Malaysian primary school requires 240 minutes per week for Level 1 students and 210 minutes per week for Level 2 students (Yamat, Fisher, & Rich, 2014). Yamat et al. (2014) added that students are taught all four skills, that is, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, through selected topics ranging from those that are familiar to those that are less familiar. This reflects the integrated cross-curriculum approach in the textbook to ensure learning is carried out within this context.

To prepare teachers to carry out these communicative language teaching approaches, five-day national-level workshops are carried out, with state-level trainers training the representative teacher from each primary school for three days. Later, the representative teacher must train all the English teachers in their school for three hours, using resource materials provided at the state-level workshop (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014).

## **2.7 Early Literacy**

### **2.7.1 Defining Early Literacy**

Basic literacy is defined as stable, measurable, generalisable and multidimensional (Powell, 1977). Generally, literacy is thought to consist of only reading and writing skills (French, 2013). Ahmed (2011) established the concept and definition of the term 'literacy'. Through time, this has evolved to provide the definition of literacy stated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) (Fransman, 2005). Literacy is viewed as a condition in which a person can read and write (Powell, 1977).

Before the millennial years, UNESCO viewed literacy as the basic skills that a person has. This is evident in the statement that a literate person is someone who “can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement in their everyday life” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1958, p. 3) and “can engage in activities where literacy is required in order to function well in society and for their own and society’s development” (UNESCO, 1978). After the millennial years, literacy is viewed more of a skill, with UNESCO (2005) defining it as

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials associated to varying contexts. Thus, the continuum of learning is required to allow the students to achieve their goals, to develop their potentials, and to fully participate with the community and society. (p. 21)

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy defined literacy as “the capacity to read, understand, and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media”, (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 8). The Department of Education and Science (2005) explained that literacy is an integration of the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking with the purpose of communication and learning to learn. Literacy starts by looking at books in early infancy and continues by learning language from meaningful interactions and experiences with a broad range of materials, texts, digital technologies and events (French, 2013).



### **2.7.2 Principles of Early Literacy**

French (2013) provided summaries of some ideas on early literacy based on the literature review conducted. The first summary stated that literacy is rooted in communication and language, and not in letters and words. This summary implies the use of sociocultural theory in literacy. Meanwhile, the second summary clearly implied the idea of emergent theory by identifying strong predictors of later literacy achievement. The third summary indicated that the level of opportunity provided to children in experiencing literacy and language correlates to the chances of their development of reading fluency. French (2013) continued by emphasising that the settings in early childhood play a significant role in exposing children to vocabulary and talking. In the fourth summary, French (2013) found that children with access to numerous books across a broad range, who use the library frequently and who are read to regularly by many different people tend to obtain a high score when their literacy is measured. The fifth summary was that children acquire language and literacy during playtime and everyday experiences. The sixth summary, along with the third and fourth summaries mentioned above, related to the settings and environment, with French (2013) summarising that the literacy development of bilingual children can be affected by differences between their home language and the culture. In this case, it is imperative that the early literacy educator is aware of, sensitive to, and respectful and supportive of the diversity that exists in these children's families, culture and linguistic background. The Connecticut State Department of Education (1998) earlier highlighted this aspect in the development early literacy. The State Department emphasised the importance of providing a comfortable and conducive learning environment in which to promote reading and writing. The final summary presented by French (2013) was that what parents, carers and educators do with children has

more impact on children's outcomes in literacy learning than their socio-economic status. The summaries listed by French (2013) are mainly related to sociocultural and emergent theories in early literacy learning.

Geekie, Cambourne and Fitzimmons (1999) listed seven principles of literacy development based on their belief that learning to be literate is social, collaborative and cultural, as set out below:

1. Learning is often a mutual accomplishment;
2. Children learn through guided participation;
3. Children profit from the support of more competent people;
4. Effective instruction is a contingent instruction;
5. It is not the interaction itself, but the quality of the interaction that contributes to better learning;
6. Language is the means through which self-regulation of learning behaviour develops; and
7. Learning depends on the negotiation of meaning.

The Government of South Australia (2007) believed that literacy is not the same for everyone as various factors are connected to different aspects such as historical, social, economic and political circumstances.

### **2.7.3 Levels of Literacy**

In reducing the level of illiteracy, Powell (1977) suggested the levels of literacy that could be applied as general indicators to mark progress in achieving the learning objectives. The levels used as indicators are the pre-literacy level, basic literacy and career literacy. The pre-literacy level is the level where students begin to obtain knowledge and use basic skills in their society through formal and informal instructions. Furthermore, Powell (1977) emphasised the importance of basic skills as

fundamental to the concept of literacy and as building blocks which, if absent, would become a barrier to becoming a civilised society. This first level is mainly concerned with basic skills that allow a person to successfully carry out the task demanded by society. Even though the tendency at the pre-literacy level is to use the possession and demonstration of performance as the main basic skills, no guarantee is provided that these skills are permanently learned as learning at this level is unstable (Powell, 1977).

Initially, at the pre-literacy level, the basic skills are not permanent. However, if a student is at the basic literacy level, the basic skills will become permanent. Even if the student may regress, the skills remain operative. Powell (1977) also mentioned that basic skills at this level can develop without formal instruction as they are generative. He emphasised that, at this level of literacy, the learned basic literacy skills could not go back to zero. This means that the student has acquired the minimal basic skill processes, leading to the possibility of measuring the skills and “those skills that are absolutely essential to its attainment can be determined” (Powell, 1977, p. 491). He then asserted that, at this level, the basic skills are permanent and operative, although their satisfactory performance cannot be guaranteed. Earlier, Powell (1977) stated that literacy must be stable, measurable, generalisable and multidimensional. At the career literacy level, the stability and generalisability elements are not applicable as different jobs have different demands (Powell, 1977). Powell added that the task levels are not generalisable for the same reason. Therefore, the career literacy level can only be measured for each occupation and cannot be generalised across vocational choices as this level is multidimensional and variable. These levels of literacy show how levels of literacy develop and the connection between them.

#### **2.7.4 Early Literacy Skills**

ZERO TO THREE (2003) highlighted the importance of early literacy skills in literacy development and the close links between children's early literacy skills and their experiences with books and stories. According to French (2013), early literacy skills, including oral language, phonological awareness, alphabetic code, print knowledge/concepts and emergent writing or mark-making (pp. 37-38), are strong predictors of later achievement. Meanwhile, Thurman and McGrath (2008) identified several variables from Byrnes (2001) that can be used to predict later literacy competence. These variables include letter knowledge (alphabetic awareness), awareness of print, phonemic or phonological awareness and oral language skills. Some of the common, most frequently mentioned variables found in the review of the literature on early literacy skills are listed below.

##### ***a) Letter knowledge (alphabetic awareness)***

Thurman and McGrath (2008) referred to letter knowledge as the child's ability to identify, differentiate and name the letters of the alphabet. They noted that some authors highlighted that letter knowledge can be used as predictor of early reading achievement. Pinto, Bigozzi and Gamannossi (2015), referring to Ecalle, Magnan and Biot-Chevrier (2008), stated that alphabet knowledge is "a multifaceted type of knowledge that includes different skills like alphabet recital, letter naming, and letter-sound knowledge" (p. 332). Children need to have easy access and much exposure to alphabets in their environment (French, 2013). As Ehri (2005) suggested, alphabetic knowledge could enhance students' vocabulary learning. According to Pinto et al. (2015), the type of alphabetic knowledge used to form connections is distinguished by the pre-alphabetic, partial, full and consolidated alphabetic phases.

### ***b) Awareness of print***

Awareness of print includes knowledge of print and the print environment, how print is organised, and how it is used for reading and writing (French, 2013). Awareness of print is regarded as a child's ability to recognise that books are read from front to back, and left to right, and that books have meaning (Strickland & Schickelandz, 2004, cited in Thurman & McGrath, 2008). The Connecticut State Department of Education (1998) emphasised that exposing children to print is where the process of learning to read and write begins and continues to emerge later. The State Department added that children who are exposed to and who had opportunities and experience with print will begin to understand that print has meaning. As with alphabetic awareness, awareness of print predicts early reading achievement and moderates the correlation between alphabetic awareness and print awareness (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

### ***c) Phonemic or phonological awareness***

The phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a language. The combination of phonemes results in the establishment of words. According to Fisher (2008), the National Reading Panel suggested that phonemic awareness is part of phonological awareness and that children are able to display their phonemic awareness after 12 hours of instruction. Phonological awareness is the general ability to hear, decipher and differentiate sound patterns, and to "notic[e] the similarities between words and their sounds" (Kennedy, Dunphy, & Dwyer, 2012; Snow et al., 1998). Stanovich (2004) classified two competences in phonological awareness, namely, superficial (rhyme recognition) and deep (phoneme recognition) levels of awareness. According to French (2013), phonological awareness supports the development of early decoding and spelling ability and is a precursor to alphabetic awareness (Kennedy et al., 2012).

Pinto et al. (2015) emphasised that rapid and correct mastery of the phoneme–grapheme is a fundamental condition for the beginner writer.

*d) Oral language skills*

Oral language may involve a combination of speaking and listening activities: in certain circumstances, one might be used more than the other, depending on the tasks provided by the teacher (McKay, 2006). Thurman and McGrath (2008) described oral language skills as the ability to name pictures, to reconstruct what was said and to use words to effectively communicate one's thoughts. Meanwhile, French (2013) identified listening, comprehension, oral language vocabulary and explanatory talk ability as oral language skills, as stated by Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006). Young learners learn best through communication, even when their proficiency grows as they move from imaginative play and action rhymes through songs to conversations, narratives and simple recounts (McKay, 2006).

Oral language is a central tool in teaching and assessment in the classroom (McKay, 2006). Oral language can be enhanced and encouraged in many ways among children, such as talking to them about their surroundings; supporting them to describe events; helping them to build background knowledge; having story telling that incorporates drama; extending their learning experiences; using puppets (Noonan-Lepaon & Ridgway, 2009); and having interactive reading stories (Whitehead, 2007). Strengthened oral language provides an essential foundation for students' literacy development and academic learning (McKay, 2006).

### *e) Emergent writing*

Emergent writing, or mark-making, is the use of marks to represent ideas that are then developed into letters and words to be read. This is crucial as it acts as the means through which children communicate and express their feelings and thoughts to others (French, 2013). Dunphy (2010) noted that mark-making should always be considered as intentional. Pinto et al. (2015), in their literature review, found that the letter writing prediction is predicted by a child's global reading knowledge.

#### **2.7.5 Strategies in Assessing Early Literacy**

The terms 'methods and approaches' are often used to describe classroom strategies for assessing students' early literacy. Various strategies can be used by teachers to assess their students' progress in literacy. These strategies include observation, interaction with students and between students, the tasks provided and utilising feedback (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Dunphy, 2010; McKay, 2006).

##### *a) Observation*

Observation in the classroom can be done formally or informally or, as described by McKay (2006), as incidental or planned observation. Incidental observation is when teachers observe students who are engaged in classroom tasks or activities. It is part of the teaching role. Informal observation does not have a set procedure to follow, even though it is not carried out without a purpose. Meanwhile, planned observation is when teachers systematically take notes of their observations of students' performance. One of the many objectives of observation is to assess students without them being aware that they are being observed so that their natural linguistic performance is maximised (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Teachers may also observe students' interaction during a task with or without intervention (McKay, 2006).

According to McMillan (2001), effective teachers observe students in their class who show more obvious reactions than others. The two aspects that teachers may observe in students in the classroom are non-verbal behaviour and vocal cues. The non-verbal factors include body language, gestures, facial expression, tone of voice, inflection, pauses and emphases (McMillan, 2001). Non-verbal behaviour helps teachers to assess students' meanings and emotions and emphasises their verbal messages (McMillan, 2001). These emphases may occur as repetition or confirmation, denying or confusing, strengthening or emphasising, controlling or regulating. Non-verbal cues are not only rich sources of information about students' affect, but they are also the most stable and consistent data as they are "not consciously controlled, which means that the messages are relatively free from distortion and deception" (McMillan, 2001, p. 106).

Different body cues have different functions or purposes. An emblem is typically used to consciously communicate a specific message (McMillan, 2001). Instances of emblems include putting a finger to one's lip to indicate "quiet". Emblems substitute for words. Illustrators increase the clarity and awareness of what is being said (McMillan, 2001). An example of an illustrator includes a clenched fist to indicate anger. An illustrator reinforces the strength of emotional messages. An affect display is when one's emotion is portrayed through gestures, and the position and posture of the body (McMillan, 2001). Regulators indicate the initiation, length and termination of verbal messages (McMillan, 2001). This includes when students look down at their desk to avoid answering questions or when they simply lean towards the teacher when they want to continue speaking. The final body cue that teachers may use to assess students is adapters. Adapters provide a rich source of information on students' attitudes, levels of confidence and anxiety (McMillan, 2001).



Besides body language, teachers may also assess students using voice-related cues such as “tone of voice, loudness, intensity, pauses, silences, voice level, inflection, word spacing, emphases, and other aspects of voice that add colour to the content” (McMillan, 2001, p. 109). Students who are confident are generally loud, have a rapid speaking rate, a high pitch and speak fluently. In contrast, students who lack confidence or are unsure of their knowledge or ability tend to speak quietly with little variety and with many pauses, along with frequent throat clearing (McMillan, 2001, p. 109). Table 2.3 below was prepared by McMillan (2001) to gain a better understanding of messages sent through certain vocal cues.

**Table 2.3**

***Messages According to Vocal Cues (McMillan, 2001)***

<b>Vocal Cues</b>	<b>Message</b>
Loudness	<i>Loud</i> – competent, enthusiastic, forceful, self-assured, excited <i>Quiet</i> – anxious, unsure, shy, indifferent
Pitch	<i>High</i> – excited, explosively angry, emotional <i>Low</i> – calm, sad, stunned, quietly angry, indifferent <i>Variety</i> – dynamic, extroverted
Rate	<i>Fast</i> – interest, self-assured, angry, happy, proud, confident, excited, impulsive, emotional <i>Slow</i> – uninterested, unsure, unexcited, unemotional
Quality (combination of attributes)	<i>Flat</i> – sluggish, cold, withdrawn <i>Nasal</i> – unattractive, lethargic, foolish

Overall, McMillan (2001) emphasised the importance of teachers not assessing students based on a single non-verbal behaviour or vocal cue.

## *b) Questioning*

Questioning is another strategy on which teachers rely heavily when giving their instructions to see if students understand the lesson and are able to perform certain required skills (McMillan, 2001). This strategy often occurs in three formats as teacher-led reviews of content, discussions and recitations. The first format is often designed to cover specific knowledge through a fast-paced drill (McMillan, 2001).

According to McMillan (2001), the five purposes of questioning are: (1) to get students involved in the lesson; (2) to promote students' thinking and comprehension; (3) to review important content; (4) to control students; and (5) to assess students' progress. Teachers may use questioning to easily grab students' attention, and to control student behaviour as well as to manage the class. When teachers have students' attention, questions can easily be used to challenge beliefs, to provoke students and to get them to think about the topic being taught through cognitive dissonance (McMillan, 2001). Through questioning, teachers promote students' reasoning and understanding of the lesson, thus enhancing their learning. Questioning also serves as an indicator to students of the important content they need to master (McMillan, 2001). It gives them the opportunity to assess their understanding in these areas. Effective questioning also allows teachers to obtain information on students' understanding and progress.

The first characteristic of effective questioning is to ask clear succinct questions (McMillan, 2001). Questions are considered vague if too many possible responses are possible or if the question is too general. Students are more likely to answer questions if they know what is intended and how to respond (McMillan, 2001). The questions asked must also reflect the learning targets for the lesson by taking into consideration two aspects: the degree of emphasis on different topics that are to be

formally assessed in the test and the difficulty of the learning targets (McMillan, 2001). In questioning, the knowledge targets focus on remembering and understanding, often beginning with the 4W questions (what, who, where and when). The question is convergent in nature if only one correct answer is possible. Reasoning targets are generally divergent, encouraging students to analyse, synthesise, create and evaluate (McMillan, 2001). For this reason, reasoning questions are excellent if used to enhance students' cognitive process and discussion, but are inefficient if used to assess students' progress against knowledge questions (McMillan, 2001). McMillan (2001) suggested that teachers keep a balance between knowledge questions and reasoning questions to retain students' attention and to enhance their broad range of abilities. In addition, addressing the question to the whole class and giving students time to think before calling a specific name encourages students to be responsible for an answer, while keeping them engaged and involved in the lesson (McMillan, 2001). Another point for effective questioning is allowing sufficient wait time, ideally three to five seconds, for enhanced quality and quantity in a student's response (McMillan, 2001). It is also imperative that teachers give appropriate responses to students' answers. According to McMillan (2001), the "climate and pattern of interaction between students and teachers, and the teacher's style and approach" have an impact on students' likelihood to provide an answer to the question (p. 117). Teachers are also advised to avoid a yes/no question, tugging, guessing, leading questions and asking students what they already know. Instead, teachers are advised to ask questions in an appropriate sequence which usually begins with knowledge questions to determine if the student knows enough before proceeding with reasoning questions (McMillan, 2001).

### *c) Tasks*

The definition of tasks has developed from being traditionally discussed as teaching activities with intended pedagogical purposes (Purpura, 2004) to being able to elicit interaction and negotiation of meaning and to engage students in complex meaning-focused activities (McKay, 2006, p. 100). A task often requires students to use targeted language to achieve a particular goal or objective in a particular situation (McKay, 2006). Teachers may utilise tasks for an instructional strategy or as a method of assessment (Butler & McMunn, 2006).

The tasks assigned to students, whether individually, in pairs or in groups, may involve the four literacy skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking (McKay, 2006). Teachers may also use a combination of these skills in a task. Tasks allow teachers to assess students through observation during the task, during teaching or through formal assessment itself (McKay, 2006). Teachers have the freedom to choose from a range of tasks while taking account of students' proficiency levels and interest, and the demands of the curriculum. Tasks can be simple and supported by teachers, or can be complex and performed independently (McKay, 2006). Tasks may involve problem solving or may address information gaps, opinion gaps, affective gaps, or may comprise games, drama tasks, tasks using pictures, etc. (McKay, 2006). McKay (2006) affirmed that games and drama tasks allow teachers to observe and note students' performance as the task's rhythm as it proceeds is suitable for utilisation as classroom assessment.

Many kinds of tasks can be used to assess students' early literacy in the classroom. Among the different types of reading tasks that can be applied to assess students' early literacy are reading aloud, written responses, multiple choice

techniques, picture-cued items, picture-matching, and cloze and gap-filling tasks (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; McKay, 2006). Through oral reading, skills such as

word pronunciation, recognition of punctuation, speed of reading (checked through pace), and understanding of meaning (checked through intonation, stress, and voice modulation revealing shades of meaning) can be assessed. (McKay, 2006)

The purpose of assessment is usually to tap into students' global understanding of a text, as opposed to asking test-takers to "zoom in" on small details (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 229).

Other tasks that can be used to assess writing include spelling tests, picture-cued tasks, multiple-choice techniques and matching phonetic symbols (McKay, 2006). Speaking tasks during classroom assessment may involve conversational interaction which requires students "to listen to short turns in order to respond, make split-second decisions on what to say, when to intervene, and how to take [a] turn" (pp. 187-188) or extended speaking which involves a student "giving [an] uninterrupted talk and requires their own internal coherence" (p. 188) (McKay, 2006). These tasks may not necessarily be entirely communicative activities as they could also serve as "pre-communicative work" in which a selection of skills is practised as preparation for later activities or assessment (Allison, 1999).

When undertaking prior preparation for any task to be given to students, teachers need to consider several different factors based on their knowledge of the task's purposes and the characteristics of the learning situation (McKay, 2006). This includes students' characteristics such as their age, interest, motivations, and social and personal characteristics. Having this prior knowledge allows teachers to select suitable tasks to suit students' characteristics and needs. Besides taking account of students' characteristics, teachers also need to assess the relevant abilities that students need to ensure their success in language learning (McKay, 2006). The tasks given to

assess students should also engage students intellectually as it should promote their metacognition (Butler & McMunn, 2006; McKay, 2006). One way is to include a story, problem, general knowledge or curriculum-related topic in the task to encourage students' interest and motivation (McKay, 2006). Teachers are also encouraged to avoid relying on only one source information, instead applying multiple strategies when assessing. These strategies include observation, self-assessment, quizzes, etc. to obtain a more accurate and composite picture of students' abilities (McKay, 2006). Overall, a good assessment task is one that encourages students' success (Butler & McMunn, 2006).

#### *d) Feedback*

According to McMillan (2001), the right kind of feedback is essential for effective teaching and learning. Feedback is the "transfer of information from a teacher to a student following an assessment" (McMillan, 2001, p. 120). In formative assessment, learning is enhanced when students are provided with feedback on their work quality as well as guidance to improve their work, a view supported by Black and Wiliam (1998), Crooks (1988), Fuchs and Fuchs (1986), Hattie (1987, 1990), Natriello (1987) and (National Research Council, 2001). Feedback verifies the degree of accuracy of an answer or an action (McMillan, 2001). It is part of ongoing assessment as it informs students and confirms teachers' views of their students' progress (McMillan, 2001).

Feedback and assessment are interrelated. Combining feedback and guidance contributes to effective feedback (Boyle & Charles, 2014; Butler & McMunn, 2006). It is important for students to be aware of the standards against which they are to be judged prior to assessment (McMillan, 2001). Relating feedback to the standard allows students to better understand how their performance compares to the expectation in the

standard, thus providing them with guidance. As affirmed by Boyle and Charles (2014), for students to effectively move forward with feedback, they need to know the targeted goal and their performance before they can progress towards that goal. Therefore, when feedback is placed in the context of previous and expected performances, progress will be achieved.

The most effective feedback involves giving specific, descriptive and precise feedback on students' progress and what corrective actions they can take (McMillan, 2001; Kuang, 2013). Prior to giving feedback, teachers need to identify and determine the most significant error made by students or what changes students need make that would be beneficial to them in moving forward (McMillan, 2001). Corrective actions conveyed in feedback must be pragmatic and doable to give students the opportunity to engage in their improvement (McMillan, 2001). As affirmed by McMillan (2001), corrective feedback is needed for learning, while assessment is needed to provide feedback (p. 120). Providing students with frequent and immediate corrective actions enables them to significantly improve their performance (McMillan, 2001). Therefore, in all feedback, it is important that teachers convey both these elements by stating the students' progress and delivering constructive criticism to them in the most suitable context and using the appropriate method.

The way feedback is delivered is as important as what is being delivered. When giving feedback, teachers must be mindful of their body language and tone of voice and the words used to ensure that effective feedback is provided. Kuang (2013) suggested that feedback should first focus on the positive aspect, followed by the negative. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) also suggested that teachers start by praising students for their strengths before giving constructive criticism. All in all, as

McMillan (2001) affirmed, effective feedback is given when students are informed about what they did wrong, what they need to correct and how they can rectify it.

## **2.8 Theories Related to Early Literacy and Language Learning**

A rather large body of research uses numerous theories to explain early literacy development in children and how language is learnt. Some of these theories are mentioned by Lilly and Green (2004) in their book titled *Developing Partnerships with Families Through Children's Literature*, including: the maturationist theory, behaviourist theory, connectionist theory, social-constructivist theory, critical theory and emergent literacy theory. Other theories include the theory of literacy development and family literacy theory. However, the theories reviewed under this category in the current study are sociocultural theory and emergent literacy theory.

### **2.8.1 Sociocultural Theory in Early Literacy**

Sociocultural theory is said to be derived from Lev Vygotsky (Dorn, 1996; Justice & Ezell, 1999; Hassett, 2008; Poehner, 2008; van Lier, 2008; Shooshtari & Mir, 2014). The principle of this theory is that social interaction is seen as a tool that can help in transmitting specific knowledge for learning (Dorn, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) made clear that “learning should be matched in some manner with the child’s development” (p. 85). He further asserted that if we truly recognise the actual relationship of the developmental process to learning capabilities, we cannot limit ourselves to only identifying students’ developmental levels (Lantolf, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Rather, we need to identify these two levels, namely, the actual developmental level and the zone of proximal development if we are to understand the state of children’s mental development.



Vygotsky (1978) explained the actual development level as “the level of development of a child’s mental functions that has been established as a result of certain completed developmental cycles” (p. 85). In other words, the actual developmental level is the end-product of development whereby children’s functions have matured. Vygotsky (1978) also questioned how previous intellectual philosophers had never queried the notion that children’s abilities are indicative of their mental abilities. He argued that perhaps if assistance was provided to children, this could provide a better indication of their mental abilities. Vygotsky (1978) also described the actual developmental level attributes mental development retrospectively.

The second level, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), was described by Vygotsky (1978) when he stated that

the distance between the actual developmental level was determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development was determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

In other words, the ZPD is where functions are in the process of maturation. According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD attributes mental development prospectively. The ZPD’s introduction was in the form of a proposal on the issue of learning and development after his rejection of the three theoretical positions that he discussed in his book. Through the ZPD, development that occurs within a child can be understood by allowing us to outline the child’s current developmental state and what is maturing (Vygotsky,1978).

Vygotsky (1978) concluded that the learning process precedes the developmental process and that learning and development can never be accomplished in equal measure, even though they are directly related to one another. To better understand the ZPD, Lantolf (2007) emphasised the importance of understanding what

Vygotsky (1978) meant by learning and development. Lantolf (2007) summarised Vygotsky's point of view as learning being understood as the capabilities of an individual with assistance from others. Meanwhile, the conceptualisation of development, as highlighted by John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), is "the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized process" (p. 3). Lantolf's (2007) understanding of development from Vygotsky's point of view is that the outcome from the assistance received enables individuals to function independently, thus extending their capabilities to a broader range of circumstances (Lantolf, 2007).

Poehner (2008) suggested that the basic principle of this theory is that "human cognition is mediated socially through interaction and culturally through the use of cultural objects" (p. 26). Cultural objects, other than direct or explicit and indirect or implicit, can be a form of assistance (Lantolf, 2007). Poehner (2008) affirmed Vygotsky's (1978) claim that higher forms of consciousness are developed when children are allowed to be engaged in activities arbitrated by others and cultural objects. They will also develop awareness and control over their psychological functions.

Similar to Poehner's (2008) viewpoint, John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) summarised the view of sociocultural theory as being "based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development" (p. 2). Anh and Marginson (2010) illustrated the view that sociocultural theory focuses on the fundamental role of social relationships and artefacts that are culturally constructed when organising the thinking. Lilly and Green (2004) summarised the primary principles of this theory as: (1) children construct knowledge within a socially mediated cultural context; (2) language is the key component in

children's appropriation of knowledge; (3) knowledge is constructed most effectively when adults scaffold or support their children's development at appropriate levels; and (4) children acquire knowledge with the help of an adult or a more experienced peer. Although John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) believed that Vygotsky had developed a "multifaceted" theory (p. 2), Poehner (2008) specifically argued that the definition of the ZPD was rather general for interpretation purposes and demonstrated a lack of definition for terms like adult guidance and collaboration. Moreover, John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) admitted that Vygotsky's (1978) ideas were not fully developed as he died from tuberculosis at a young age. Despite his early death, his theory is becoming increasingly influential, particularly in Western countries (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Vygotsky (1978) implicitly stressed the importance of acknowledging and understanding the child's needs as this recognition leads to an understanding of the uniqueness of play as a form of activity and not only as a pleasurable activity. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) highlighted the benefits of considering the child's needs in creating an effective learning environment. Hassett (2008) affirmed that sociocultural theory helps us to shift from a view of reading, thought to happen only in the head, to seeing it as "deeply embedded and inseparable from specific contexts, contents, and purposes of reading" (p. 301). Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of organising the teaching of both reading and writing in a way that would fulfil the child's needs. He also focused on the idea that writing should be taught naturally, be meaningful to children, and be incorporated into necessary and relevant tasks, thus inciting their intrinsic needs.

According to Purcell-Gates, Perry and Briseño (2011), literacy, as a social practice, is a field of study that is heavily theoretically motivated. It provides a substantial way of thinking about the reader in relation to the text and in the context of reading (Hassett, 2008). Hassett (2008) summarised the sociocultural perspective of literacy as more than simply reading or writing and decoding or encoding. This theory acknowledges that children bring their experiences to the texts they are reading, as well as the knowledge of the skills to use with the text as they interpret meaning from it in specific social circumstances. The sociocultural theory recognises various forms of literacy by making literacy reasonable to all social groups (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). In relation to sociocultural theory, the classroom is seen as the place where meaning and understanding can be constructed socially and together (Hassett, 2008). Drawing from and using the knowledge and identity resources demonstrate how readers construct meaning (Hassett, 2008). Davis (2010) explained in her study how instruction affects children's experiences, according to the sociocultural perspective. Generally, students construct meaning through transactional exchanges with several social and contextual factors.

In the Malaysian context, the approach used in teaching English is weighed more towards using communication (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). Literacy is taught by focusing on reading and writing skills as it is mostly these skills that are measured in the national examination (Yamat et al., 2014). However, these authors believed that language learning is "a social act and to understand that requires understanding on how the process is experienced" (p. 176). Their findings revealed that parents' backgrounds of acquiring and learning English and their cultural practices had an impact on how children practise literacy at home and how the environment and the opportunity for language learning take place. Meanwhile, within the classroom, teachers who practise

formative assessment “define and share the learning intentions and the scaffolding they will receive” (Sardareh & Saad, 2012, p. 344). This allows students to have active roles in their assessment as well as in their learning process as they need to collaborate with their teacher to monitor their progress (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). To increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, Yamat et al. (2014) suggested that students’ confidence in using English must be developed, together with their listening and speaking skills, to increase their exposure to and opportunities to use the language, and that environments conducive to learning English should be created. In addition, Sardareh and Saad (2012) asserted that teachers should use AfL efficiently to meet students’ needs. Furthermore, Cheng (2015) emphasised that the key to success in supporting students’ learning in classroom practice is to use quality classroom assessment practices. Sardareh and Saad (2012) believed that scaffolding and cooperative learning would connect Vygotsky’s (1978) theory to teachers’ AfL practices.

### **2.8.2 Emergent Literacy Theory in Early Literacy**

It is said that the work of Dolores Durkin, which began in 1966, paved the way for research on emergent literacy (Fisher, 2008). Her study revealed that children who were able to read when they entered school, were engaged in pretend reading and writing and had exposure to their parents or carers reading to them. Fisher (2008) then outlined the primary principle of this theoretical perspective which highlights that various behaviours lead to an emergent understanding of the process of reading and not simply beginning to learn to read at a particular age or developmental stage. Although it was Durkin who paved the way for emergent literacy to emerge, it was Marie Clay to whom the development of emergent literacy theory is typically attributed.

Lilly and Green (2004) included the definition of emergent literacy by Neuman, Copple and Bredekamp (2000) who stated that literacy learning is viewed as beginning at birth and is then encouraged through participation in meaningful activities by adults, with these literacy behaviours eventually changing and becoming conventional over time. Teale (1990) described legitimate literacy learning as beginning very early in the lives of children in a literate society. He added that, in emergent literacy, all four literacy skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking are developed concurrently and are interrelated. However, Parker (1990) argued that this idea is not exactly recent as the claim was made in the mid-1960s by the Language Across the Curriculum movement (Parker & Goodkin, 1987, cited in Parker, 1990). The idea behind emergent literacy is that children will gradually be able to master literacy if they are exposed to it at a very young age. Furthermore, those who are actively engaged in interesting and meaningful literacy experiences will develop literacy knowledge earlier (Lilly & Green, 2014). To become independent readers under emergent literacy, every aspect of children's interaction with books, print, reading and writing is taken into account as children go through a process to become literate through active engagement in their daily activities (Parker, 1990).

The basic principle for this theoretical perspective is believed to be that it is the various types of behaviour that "lead to an emergent understanding of the process of reading" and not beginning to learn to read at a particular age or a specific developmental stage (Fisher, 2008). Fisher (2008) stated that children are greatly influenced through reading and writing due to the exposure to print that they receive in their environment, including their home.

On the other hand, Mason and Stewart (1990) demonstrated how the concepts of emergent literacy can be part of instructions through their proposed framework for instructionally-based assessment. This framework includes concepts and functions of literacy, knowledge of letters and words, listening comprehension and word understanding, and writing and composing. Table 2.4 below summarises what Mason and Stewart (1990) included in the four aspects of emergent literacy delineated throughout a 50-year period (1939–1989).

**Table 2.4**

***Four Aspects of Emergent Literacy (Mason & Stewart, 1990)***

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**Concepts and functions of literacy**

- Knowledge of terms used to talk about reading (terms for describing print and reading tasks, location of top and bottom of page, book cover, knowledge of punctuation marks)
- Understanding functions of print (can provide examples of uses for print materials, such as newspapers, advertisements, lists, greeting cards, etc.)
- Knowing how the act of reading is carried out (including where to begin and continue reading; knowing how to separate speech into words, syllables and letters; and being able to track or follow along as a printed text is read)
- Emergent reading of storybooks
- Self-perception of learning to read
- Context-sensitive strategies for word reading
- Knowledge of environmental print words in context

**Knowledge of letters and words**

- Letter knowledge
- Phonological awareness of beginning and ending sounds of words
- Grapheme–phoneme correspondence knowledge
- Word recognition

**Listening comprehension and word understanding**

- Recall, retell or complete a partially told story
  - Define, classify and draw analogies to words
  - Multiple cue strategies for reading texts
-

**Table 2.4 (Continue)**

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**Writing and composing**

- Writing words
  - Sentence dictation
  - Story composition
- 

Thurman and McGrath (2008) believed that assessors could conduct a dynamic assessment to understand how students acquire their literacy skills through play-based and curriculum-based assessments.

In the Malaysian context, the mention or use of the emergent theory is not apparent even though the encouragement received from the Ministry of Education Malaysia is to use active interactive learner-centred approaches to learning to encourage children to be exposed to English as early as possible to develop their basic oral skills (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). The lack of reference to this theory could be due to the positioning of Malaysian students as second language learners and not as English language learners. However, parents today are aware of the importance of English with many expressing unhappiness with the decision to revert to Bahasa Malaysia for the teaching of Mathematics and Science (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). In addition, most parents are practising using English at home with their children as early as possible. One of the findings in a study by Yamat et al. (2014) revealed that children who are exposed to more English-based literacy practices at home are more persistent in using the language outside of home and show better mastery of the language compared to others who have not been exposed to the English language in the same way. The relationship of these findings to emergent theory is evident even though it was not explicitly mentioned by these researchers.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

The current study aims to explore practices of early literacy assessment and to identify issues when carrying out early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) how has early literacy assessment been practised by teachers in ESL classrooms at the primary school level? and 2) what are the challenges faced by teachers when conducting early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms?

This chapter explains the research design chosen for this study, the selection of research sites and participants, the instruments used to collect data, the data analysis process and the study's ethical aspects that required consideration, as well as the establishment of the study's trustworthiness. A qualitative approach was used for this study as it was deemed the most suitable for obtaining findings in response to the research questions stated in Chapter 1. Qualitative research, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2013), uses words as data, with these data collected and analysed in various ways.

#### 3.2 Research Design

The purpose of research design is to ensure that the evidence collected enables the research questions to be answered as unambiguously as possible (Broadhurst, Holt, & Doherty, 2012). Therefore, the research design chosen for this study is a case study.

A case study is defined as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded (case is separated out for research in terms of time, place or physical boundaries) system based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, 2005, p. 439). Creswell (1998) classified the

case study as an important type of ethnographic design in a qualitative study, although it is different from ethnography in several ways. Case studies are commonly used to study an event from a wider perspective, or to focus on a specific perspective of an individual or on a holistic explanation of an event (Chua, 2012). It is an approach in which researchers can choose to study a range of simple to complex phenomena, with its unit of analysis varying from a single individual to a large group of people (Berg & Lune, 2012).

According to Curtis, Murphy and Shields (2014), the term 'case' itself has many different interpretations. Bell (1999) specifically referred to a 'case' as an "instance' which could be an introduction of a new way of working, the way an organization adapts to a new role, or any innovation or stage of development in an institution" (p. 10). On the other hand, Hamilton (2011) described the bounded unit as "a person, a group of particular professionals, an institution, a local authority etc." (p. 2) which is being examined, observed, described, and analysed to identify the components of the 'case' being studied. Curtis et al. (2014) emphasised that the 'case' is unlimited as it can be in any form, although it "needs to offer a useful example of a broader context or topic under scrutiny" (p. 76). In the current study, the practice of early literacy assessment would be the case as underpinned in the study's research questions.

Curtis et al. (2014) specified the purpose of carrying out a case study as being "to explore a specific example of a phenomenon or situation that can help to illuminate whatever research question that is under investigation" (p. 76). This is especially applicable in the current study as the researcher intends to explore the practice of early literacy assessment in Malaysian primary schools through various methods which

include interviews, classroom observations, reflections and the collection of relevant documents.

### **3.3 Selection of Research Sites and Participants**

#### **3.3.1 Selection of Research Sites**

For this study, the researcher randomly selected two different primary schools from two different suburban areas within Selangor. Having the perimeter set to the suburban area, the difference in the socio-economic condition of the community surrounding the school provided an additional perspective to the study. Comber and Nichols (2004) affirmed that schools in different locations have different levels of literacy. Selangor is not the largest state in Peninsular Malaysia nor in Malaysia, but it has the largest population and is regarded as the most developed state in Malaysia.

The three types of primary school in the Malaysian education system are: the high-performance school, locally known as *Sekolah Berprestasi Tinggi* (SBT); the cluster school of excellence, locally known as *Sekolah Kluster Kecemerlangan* (SKK); and the national school, also known as *Sekolah Kebangsaan* (SK). High-performance schools possess unique identities, ethos and characteristics in all aspects of education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Meanwhile, the cluster school of excellence, as defined by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, is a brand given to schools that have successfully distinguished themselves by attaining excellence in all aspects of school management and students' achievements. For the national school, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has provided no specific definition or description. However, it is generally known in Malaysia that national schools are the normal daily school with no special award or brand given to the school. For the purpose of this study, the researcher randomly selected two national primary schools in Selangor, in the hope of exploring the practice of early literacy assessment in its natural context, without the influence of

any of the characteristics of the high-performance school or the cluster school of excellence. This allowed the researcher to observe the actual practices of early literacy teachers and the issues they were facing in carrying out the assessment.

Prior to entering the schools, a few steps were taken to ensure that the researcher could obtain permission to enter the schools' compounds. Any research that requires the researcher to enter the school compound to collect data must obtain permission from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), Ministry of Education (MoE) Malaysia. The researcher completed and submitted the BPPDP 1.2 Form to the EPRD together with the research proposal. Two weeks after the date of the proposal's submission, the researcher received a letter from the EPRD acknowledging the research and granting the researcher permission to carry out the research at the selected schools. Once the letter of approval had been obtained, the researcher sent another letter requesting permission to carry out the research at the randomly selected schools to the District Education Office (DEO) and Selangor State Education Department (JPNS). A copy of the approval letter from the EPRD was attached as a supporting document to the application. The researcher received the approval letter from DEO and JPNS a week after the date of the submission of the letter. After the three permission letters were obtained, the researcher contacted each school's office to set an appointment with the headmaster. The objective of this meeting was to introduce the researcher to the headmaster, and to explain the purpose and importance of the study, including its expected input and outcome, prior to scheduling arrangements with potential participants. This was also to prevent any disturbance to teachers' daily activities in the school or to the school's programme, thus avoiding negative perceptions of the research.

### 3.3.2 Selection of Participants

The only study participants were English teachers, in particular, those teaching Level 1 primary school students; Year 1 to Year 3 (ages seven to nine). However, most teachers also taught Level 2 primary school students; Year 4 to Year 6. It is important to note that the number of participants for each instrument in this study differed as this depended on several circumstances, such as the headmaster's permission and teachers' willingness and availability to participate in the research. Despite having set certain criteria for participants in this study, the researcher realised, from meeting with the headmaster of each school, that not all participants would meet the criteria set at the initial stage of this research. Although having expressed to the headmaster the type of participants required for this study, the researcher had no control over which teachers chose to participate in providing data. This was due to the limited number of English teachers in the schools, especially those teaching English to Level 1 students. Furthermore, teachers were mostly busy, with some carrying out administrative roles in the school and preoccupied with the school's activities. Another contributing factor was that most participants teaching English to Level 1 students did not have a teaching English as second language (TESL) background. In some ways, this influenced the findings of the current study. Regardless, as mentioned earlier, the researcher sought to obtain answers to the research questions in the natural context of these schools.

In this study, seven teachers participated in the interviews conducted in both schools, with four teachers participating in the classroom observation in both schools. Due to the teachers' hectic schedules, only one teacher participated in the reflection. The research only involved teachers as the research questions focused on the practices and challenges of carrying out early literacy assessment; thus, no students were involved.

### **3.4 Data Collection Techniques**

The current study used the qualitative approach with a case study as its research design. Therefore, the data were gathered through several methods including semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and the collection of relevant documents related to the implementation of assessment in the classroom. Data collected from the various instruments then underwent triangulation to corroborate the study's findings.

#### **3.4.1 Interviews**

One of the reasons for employing interviews as a data collection technique is due to the "professional conversation" (Kvale, 2007). Interviews provide participants with the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives, and allow the researcher to capture the essence of the topic being discussed in their own language and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 77; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The interview is the ideal instrument for encouraging teachers to share and discuss their views on sensitive and important issues pertaining to the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A qualitative interview, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2013), is a semi-structured interview in which the researcher prepares an interview guide prior to the interview session, but does not need to rigidly adhere to this guide.

Prior to interviewing the teachers, the researcher prepared an interview guide based on the research questions set earlier, following the guidelines developed by Creswell (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2013) for conducting an interview. The researcher ensured that the interview questions were properly sequenced, beginning with less probing, less sensitive and less direct questions before going deeper into more focused and concrete questions. The questions began with warming-up questions, followed by core questions that helped to provide information in response to the

research questions, and concluded with closing questions. Once the interview questions were drafted, the researcher reviewed them again to ensure they were less obstructive yet would provide sufficient information. Appropriate wording for the interview questions was considered vital when developing effective interview questions, and would avoid damaging the rapport between participant and researcher and the subsequent data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Once permission was granted by the headmaster to interview teachers, an interview appointment was set with those teachers who had been assigned by the headmaster and who had agreed to participate in the research. All interviews were carried out at the school compound to allow teachers to feel comfortable throughout the process. Some interviews were conducted in a meeting room or library, while others were held in the canteen or classroom. The researcher ensured that, despite the different locations, the interview could be carried out and recorded without any loud noise disrupting the recording of the interview.

The researcher began each interview by first explaining what the research was about, including its objectives. The researcher emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers and that their interest was in what participants had to share, that is, their views and experiences. After the briefing, the participant teachers were given a few minutes to read the consent form and had the opportunity to ask any questions or to express any doubts that had crossed their minds. Despite the requirement to write their names on the consent form, participants were assured by the researcher that their anonymity would be observed throughout the study. The researcher also asked participants if they were comfortable with the interview session being audio-recorded for analysis purposes. This was asked to avoid participants feeling anxious or worried

about sharing their information, with the audio-recording undertaken to ensure that details were not omitted after the interview.

Each interview began with warming-up questions in which the researcher asked participants about their background and related demographic information that provided a useful context for the data. The researcher then proceeded with questions listed in the interview guide with the focus on how the participant teachers conducted early literacy assessment and the strategies they applied, while inviting them to highlight any issues they had encountered or were still facing, and to describe how they approached these issues. In the closing questions, the researcher asked participants if they wished to highlight anything else or to voice their opinions or concerns. Throughout the interview, the researcher made sure that the interview guide was used as it was intended – for guidance only. At many times in the interviews, the researcher asked additional questions not listed in the guide to gather more information on participants' input. As Braun and Clarke (2013) asserted, prompts and probes “encourage participants to open up, expand their answers to provide more details” (p. 84).

Overall, the interview sessions ranged from approximately 30–90 minutes. Teachers' availability, depth of input and background were among factors contributing to the varying length of interview sessions. As mentioned earlier, the researcher succeeded in having seven teachers from both schools participating in interviews. All interviews were conducted one-to-one with each participant to allow him/her to feel comfortable giving opinions and sharing experiences without any external factors influencing his/her input. As asserted by Chua (2012), the individual interview has a higher response rate as it allows the researcher to explain unclear questions, to obtain



more in-depth information and to avoid the influence of another teacher on the responses given.

### **3.4.2 Classroom Observation**

Creswell (2012) defined observation as “a process of gathering open-ended, first-hand information by observing people and places at a research site” (p. 211). Given its complex social settings Wilson (2009), a classroom provided the perfect avenue for the researcher to collect evidence on teachers’ practices in carrying out early literacy assessment on students. This study aimed to identify the practices and challenges of early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms. Two classrooms from each school were therefore observed for the purpose of this study.

Prior to the first observation, the researcher prepared an observation protocol as guidance, with this adapted from Creswell's (2012) guidelines. Information, such as date/day, time (duration), number of students, proficiency level and topic, was prepared and recorded by the researcher. The protocol had three sections: classroom climate, instructions and formative assessment. The first section, classroom climate, was used to identify if teachers encouraged a positive and safe environment for students in line with the formative assessment embedded in school-based assessment. The following sections, namely, instructions and formative assessment, were created to see if teachers carried out early literacy assessment formatively, and to identify the types of strategies they used during the lesson. A column on students’ responses to the instructions was provided so the researcher could jot down notes during the observation. Lastly, a checklist was also provided for the researcher to ensure that observations were carried out accordingly.

The teachers participating in the classroom observation were those teachers who had earlier participated in the interview session. However, not all teachers

interviewed were able to participate in the observation. Only two teachers from each school agreed to allow the researcher to enter their classroom for observation. As these teachers had been informed of the background and purpose of the research, they were given a consent form specifically for the classroom observation. Teachers had a few minutes to read the consent form and were given the opportunity to ask the researcher any further inquiries prior to the observation. The researcher also took the opportunity to ask if teachers would be comfortable if the observation was recorded for analysis purposes later and were ensured that anonymity would be observed. The researcher also jotted down field notes on the lesson and on how teachers assessed students in the lesson during the classroom observation. Although video-recording the observation gave a one-camera to one-perspective disadvantage, it allowed the researcher to replay the recording several times to obtain the gist and details of the observation, with these possibly not visible during the classroom observation: the video-recording could then be used in addition to field notes jotted down at the time of the observation.

In School A, Jane was quite reluctant to participate in the classroom observation. After the researcher explained the purpose and the importance of the research, as well as how other teachers had suggested that her class should be observed by the researcher, Jane agreed. In contrast, John was open to being observed by the researcher. He welcomed the researcher and was very cooperative towards the observation. As with the first teacher observed in School A, Suzy in School B was quite hesitant to participate in the classroom observation. She advised that students had just finished their final-year examination and that she had nothing further to teach them, other than to discuss their examination papers. The researcher again explained the purpose and importance of the study and Suzy then agreed. In contrast, Linda, the second teacher from School B, coincidentally had similar characteristics to John. She

was welcoming to the researcher despite having to rearrange the observation a few times as it slipped from her mind due to her busy schedule.

In summary, classroom observation gave the researcher an opportunity to observe the strategies used by teachers to assess students' early literacy, as well as observing the challenges that came with implementing the assessment. It also allowed the researcher to record information as it occurred in its actual setting. These purposes and benefits led to classroom observation being the second method used to answer the research questions. Data from this method were used to corroborate findings from the interviews as observation was carried out after the interview session.

### **3.4.3 Documents**

Documents are “public and private records that qualitative researchers obtain about a site or participants in a study” (Creswell, 2005, p. 219). Relevant documents pertaining to the teaching and assessment of students' early literacy were gathered and analysed to further strengthen or disprove the information collected from other methods. These documents included worksheets, materials used within the class for teaching and learning, records of students' marks, materials used to assess students' early literacy, and teachers' reflections in which they wrote down their thoughts and reflection from the lesson observed by the researcher. For this study, the researcher collected marked worksheets and examination papers, the teacher's notes during one assessment that contained information on students' progress and performance in class and reflection documents. These documents were mostly collected during the classroom observation with the teacher's permission, with the reflection document collected after the observation. The questions asked after the classroom observation prompted teachers to reflect on the strategies used in the classroom, allowing the researcher to obtain an insight into why they chose those strategies and what could be

improved. The reason for choosing a reflection document instead of a journal was that a journal required regular entries over a period of time (Braun & Clarke, 2013): even with the reflection document, due to teachers' hectic schedules, only one teacher managed to respond. Nevertheless, the input from the reflection was used to corroborate findings from the use of other methods. These relevant documents, including records of the feedback given to students, strengthened the quality of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), allowing the researcher to gain an insight into how assessment was used in the classroom to assess students' early literacy. The information in the documents also corroborated findings from other methods used in this study.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

This study aimed to explore practices and to identify challenges of early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom. The qualitative approach for gathering data used methods including interviews, classroom observation, reflection and relevant document collection. Acquiring a clear understanding of how to analyse the data obtained to formulate answers to research questions is crucial when analysing qualitative data (Creswell, 2005).

An explanation of some of the features in the process of analysing qualitative data is provided next. Analysing qualitative data is inductive in form, with researchers moving from the detailed data to the general, such as codes and themes so they can generate a larger picture (Creswell, 2005). In this process, data collection and data analysis are conducted simultaneously, which differs from the process in quantitative analysis (Creswell, 2005). Analysing qualitative data is also an iterative process in which researchers may go back and forth between data collection and data analysis to

fill in gaps (Creswell, 2005). In this form of analysis, the data are read several times and are analysed each time to gain a deeper understanding of the information obtained (Creswell, 2005). This is eclectic in the sense that no single, accepted approach has been agreed for analysing qualitative data (Creswell, 2005). Analysing qualitative data also means that the researcher “makes [a] personal assessment as to a description that fits the situation or themes that capture the major categories of information” (Creswell, 2005, p. 232).

In the current study, the researcher employed thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data obtained. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 175). Thematic analysis comprises several different types and variations. Inductive thematic analysis aims to generate analysis from the bottom-up (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Theoretical thematic analysis is guided by an existing theory and theoretical concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Experiential thematic analysis focuses on participants’ standpoint, that is, how they make sense of their experience in the world (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Constructionist thematic analysis focuses on how topics are constructed and also on how these accounts construct the world (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thematic analysis merely provides a method used for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Its flexibility allows researchers to answer almost any type of research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thematic analysis is accessible to researchers with little or no qualitative research experience as it is relatively easy and quick to learn and do (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is for these reasons that thematic analysis was selected to analyse the qualitative data obtained for the current research.

Prior to data analysis, the researcher organised the data into appropriate folders to avoid confusion. This process was applied to all data obtained from each instrument

used in this study. Once the data were organised, the researcher prepared the data for transcription. Transcription is defined as “the process of converting audiotape recordings or field notes into text data” (Creswell, 2005, p. 233). A template for transcribing the recorded interviews and observations was also prepared and designed. This was to ensure that all important information pertaining to that interview and classroom observation was available, together with the transcription, for ease of reference. The lines of each transcript were then numbered on the left side of the page for ease of reference later during the actual analysis process. The researcher then developed an interview matrix to prepare for analysis of the interview conducted. The interview matrix began with a column for the research question posed for this study. This was followed by questions from the interview that related to the research question. Questions not listed in the interview protocol were also included and coloured differently in accordance with which participant teacher was being interviewed to enable the researcher to identify additional probing questions related to the question in the interview protocol. The final column was for coding. Once the interview had been transcribed and data matrixes had been prepared, the researcher read through each transcript several times to familiarise herself with the text before proceeding with coding.

Coding is “the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (Creswell, 2005, p. 237). In the interview matrix, answers were placed under each respective teacher’s column, according to the question asked during the interview. Additional questions under the main question were also included and coloured differently, according to the teacher being interviewed, to differentiate between the actual question and the teacher’s answers to other questions in the matrix. The texts were read again and the codes were re-examined to ensure

overlapping between codes was reduced. The reduced list of codes was then examined again to identify emerging themes. The themes that emerged included: the use of observation, questioning, exercises, pair/group work, quizzes, educational games and feedback to assess students. The issues identified in carrying out the assessment included: teachers' knowledge and preparation, time constraints, the purpose of assessment, unclear meaning and lack of an exercise bank. A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Hence, the researcher ensured that the coding and identification of emerging themes throughout the data analysis process were always guided by this study's purpose and its research questions. This process was repeated with all seven participants across all the collected data.

This study utilised several different methods to obtain data. Findings from these data needed validating to determine their accuracy and dependability, with this able to be done via triangulation. Triangulation is the process of gathering information from varied sources and perspectives (different individuals, different types of data or different methods of data collection) with the purpose of simultaneously merging the data to corroborate the evidence. The results obtained are used to understand the research problem and to provide strengths to counterbalance weaknesses in other forms of data collected (Creswell, 2005; Chua, 2012). Similarly, Miles et al. (2014) explained triangulation as "a way of getting the finding in the first place – by seeing or hearing multiple instances from different sources by using different methods and by squaring the finding with others that [it] needs to be squared with" (p. 300). The data obtained via classroom observations went through the same procedure as the interview data above. The study referred to field notes from classroom observations and to data

collected from document collection to support or counterbalance evidence found with other methods. Therefore, triangulation of the various data collected allowed the researcher to corroborate these data to support or counterbalance weaknesses from the methods used in this study.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

It is imperative that data are collected ethically with respect for individuals and sites (Creswell, 2005). In order to ensure that the current research was conducted in an ethical manner, the researcher needed to consider certain aspects. Prior to entering the schools for data collection, the researcher made a formal application to the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), Ministry of Education (MoE) Malaysia to enter the school compounds to collect data for research purposes. The same process was carried out with the District Education Office (DEO) and the State Education Office (SEO). An appointment was made with the headmaster from each school to convey the purpose and importance of this research, with the same process then undertaken with teachers. The researcher explained her understanding that teachers would voluntarily participate in the research and if a teacher decided to withdraw from participation, he/she was able to do so. Prior every form of data collection, consent forms were also given to teachers to read and, if they agreed, they were to sign the form. The consent form informed each teacher of the researcher's background, the purpose of this study and his/her rights as a voluntary participant. All teachers who participated in the research signed the consent form, on which they were also assured of their anonymity. As all teachers in this study permitted recording, it was the researcher's responsibility to ensure that no image, audio recording or any other personal information was revealed. The researcher was also responsible for ensuring



that the collected data were kept securely and not revealed to individuals outside of the study.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

Guba (1985) proposed the following four criteria to measure trustworthiness in qualitative research; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To address the credibility aspect of the current research, the researcher ensured that triangulation was used during the study's data analysis. The teachers were randomly selected for interviews, classroom observations and reflections to avoid bias, albeit depending on their availability. The researcher had not previously met or communicated with the selected teachers until introduced by the headmaster of each school. Prior to the actual data collection and after meeting with the headmaster, the researcher visited the school compound to develop an early familiarity with the school's culture. As previously stated, the teachers were informed, via the consent form, that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study should they feel the need to do so. The researcher also employed iterative questioning during the interviews to detect falsehoods should contradictions emerge. The researcher also reviewed previous research findings based on the literature reviewed, with this included in the discussion in Chapter 5. To address transferability, the study explained the background of the research in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provided the detailed literature review on assessment, school-based assessment and early literacy while, in the findings presented in Chapter 4, further background of the schools and the participant teachers were presented. Details on the approaches used to collect and analyse the data were described in Chapter 3 to address dependability as it allows future researchers to repeat the work in their research. In addressing confirmability, the researcher's objectivity was crucial to ensure that the study's findings were a result

of the experiences and ideas of participants, and not an expression of the researcher's preferences (Shenton, 2004). As mentioned earlier, the findings from this study were a result of the triangulation process involving the various methods used in data collection.

Universiti Malaya

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter reveals the findings of the study. The study's objectives were to examine the methods of early literacy assessment in the ESL (English as a second language) classroom at two selected national primary schools, and to identify teachers' perceptions of the use of school-based assessment in relation to the practice of early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms. The following research questions closely guided this study.

1. What are the methods of early literacy assessment practised by teachers in ESL classrooms at primary school level?
2. What are the perceptions of using school-based assessment in early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms?

Section 4.2 introduces the background of both schools. In Section 4.3, the researcher presents participants' details to provide the demographic background for the findings. Section 4.4 presents the findings of this study. The themes that emerged and were identified from the data analysis to answer the study's research questions are presented as topics. The first topic elaborated is teachers' understanding and attitudes towards school-based assessment. It is pivotal that these are clarified as they provide insights into teachers' foundation in assessment, thus, influencing their practice of early literacy assessment in the classroom. The findings identified six themes that emerged specifically in the practice of early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms at primary school level. These practices comprised observation, questioning, worksheets/exercises, pair/group work, quizzes and educational games. Feedback was

another theme that emerged from the analysis. The final topic comprised the themes that emerged in relation to teachers' perceptions of administering school-based assessment in early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms. These themes comprised teachers' knowledge and practice, time constraints, the purpose of assessment, unclear meaning and lack of an exercise bank for lower-level students. At the end of this chapter, a summary concludes the overall findings.

## 4.2 Selected Schools

This study took place at two randomly selected national primary schools in the state of Selangor. The researcher ensured that the selected schools were not high-performance schools (HPSs) or cluster schools (CSs) and that they were national schools. The reason for conducting this study in national schools is explained in subsection 3.3.1. The schools are anonymously referred to as *Sekolah Kebangsaan Satu (1)* (SK1) and *Sekolah Kebangsaan Dua (2)* (SK2), respectively. The characteristics of the schools are further explained below.

In total, 293 students attend SK1, of which 156 are Level 1 students and 137 are Level 2 students. Five teachers teach English at SK1, comprising four teachers who major in English and one teacher who is not a major in English and who also teaches Mathematics. The school is situated in a suburban area on a rather steep hill and has limited space. In total, 12 classes are held, with only six classes for Level 1 students. This means that each year level (Years 1, 2 and 3) has only two classes as the school has a small number of students. For instance, the two classes for Year 1 are labelled as *Kemboja* and *Seroja* and this labelling is continued in the other year-level classes. The school buildings are situated close to one another. This school also has a huge field, yet some parts of it are not fully utilised, only being used in certain situations that

require additional space. Near the field is a small building which was initially a computer laboratory. However, the laboratory was converted to a classroom for Year 4 students. An advantage of the small school area is that students, as well as teachers, find it easy to move from one place to another. Between the main building and the canteen is a small court. While waiting to meet the headmaster, the researcher browsed through the school's photo album which displayed photos of honoured guests during school events in the 1970s and 1980s.

Unlike SK1, SK2 is situated in a housing area where it is quite hidden. The school is almost the same size as SK1, with the buildings no more than two levels. In total, 378 students attend SK2, comprising 201 Level 1 students and 177 Level 2 students. This school has five teachers teaching the English subject. However, only two teachers are English majors. As in SK1, in total, 12 classes are held in SK2. As the number of students is small, each year level has only two classes. It was quite easy to move around within the school compound as the buildings are closely interconnected.

### **4.3 Participants**

This section presents participants' demographic backgrounds, including their educational backgrounds, teaching experience, their attitudes and their behaviour during the interview and classroom observation, and the class that they teach. This section provides a background context for the findings extracted from this study.

#### **4.3.1 Lucy**

The first interview session was with Lucy who taught English. This was held on the first day that the researcher came to the school to discuss the study's purpose with the headmaster. After the discussion between the headmaster and the researcher

went smoothly, he was supportive, allowing the researcher to interview teachers. He immediately called one of the teachers, Lucy, to his room and introduced her to the researcher. After the headmaster informed her about the study, Lucy seemed reluctant to participate in the interview. She reported that she had a class to teach and did not have much time. However, the researcher convinced Lucy that the interview would be brief and she finally agreed to be interviewed.

The researcher was guided to the meeting room to conduct the interview as it was felt this would be an appropriate setting. Before the interview started, the researcher briefly explained the study objectives to Lucy and showed her the consent form that she needed to sign. The interview was audio recorded with Lucy's permission.

Lucy has been teaching at this school for three years. She taught Mathematics as a major and English as a minor. She has been teaching Mathematics and English since she was posted to the school. Both her subjects required her to teach for 10 periods, a total of five hours. Lucy then informed the researcher that she was teaching Year 4 students and not Year 1 to Year 3 students. This explained her evident reluctance to participate in the interview, with this expressed when she asked if she was still required for the interview. The researcher convinced her that her information and insight were still valuable, although they might not provide details or specific answers to the research questions. Lucy was teaching the first class of Year 4 students which generally had good students. Most of the answers provided by Lucy were rather brief and not detailed. Therefore, the researcher had to ask further questions to get more detailed answers from Lucy.

### 4.3.2 Ashley

The second teacher interviewed was Ashley, the Chairman of the English Committee at the school. The interview was carried out in the library as it was more comfortable with low noise disruption. Ashley was a class teacher and the teacher-in-charge for the chess club. Ashley was mostly teaching Year 5 and Year 6, although she was also teaching Year 3. Ashley has eight years of teaching experience and has taught for three years in the current school. Considering her teaching experience before school-based assessment was implemented, Ashley was able to provide a comparison of early literacy assessment practice before and after the school-based assessment implementation. She also had a clear understanding of the difference between summative assessment and formative assessment and could provide her opinion on the implementation of the current educational assessment:

*The difference is that one (summative assessment) is done at the end of a topic or [at the] end of a certain period of time. The other one (formative assessment) is done throughout the process.*

(Ashley, Interview, L161, L166)

In her first two years of teaching, Ashley also taught Level 1 students before she taught Year 5 and Year 6 students.

### 4.3.3 Jane

Jane has been teaching at the school for almost nine years since being posted there in 2008. She began her teaching experience in her hometown in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia in 2004 and has a total of 13 years of teaching experience. She has been teaching English to fulfil the vacancy as not enough English teachers were available. Ten (10) periods were allocated as the teaching period per class. Previously, when the syllabus still used the KBSR, the allocation was only seven to eight periods per class. However, with the school-based assessment implementation, the allocation

has been extended to 10 periods per week per class. In the current year, Jane was teaching three classes which indicated that she had 30 periods to teach, totalling five hours per week.

The interview with Jane, who was very responsive, was carried out in the meeting room. She provided detailed elaboration whenever the researcher probed for more information. However, having Jane participate in the classroom observation was rather challenging as it was difficult to get in touch with her. After some effort, the researcher managed to convince her and to arrange a schedule for the classroom observation. It was the researcher's intention to have those teachers who participated in the study also participating in the reflection. However, Jane was occupied with other school matters on that day so she could not participate in the reflection.

#### **4.3.4 John**

John was posted to the school about five months prior to the interview. This was his first posting since he graduated from one of the teacher education institutes in Malaysia. John was teaching English in Year 3 and Year 4 classes, each of which had students of mixed proficiency. Other than teaching English, John was the Chairman of the Moral Education Committee, a Co-Curriculum Coordinator, Committee Member for Facilities, a class teacher, as well as the teacher-in-charge of netball. The interview with John was carried out twice, once in the classroom while students were doing their work, and the second time in the school canteen after the class had ended. The classroom observation with John was easy to arrange as he was cooperative prior to and during the meeting and willing to participate in the reflection.



#### **4.3.5 Nick**

Nick came from the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. He was also a teacher who graduated from one of the teacher education institutes in Malaysia. As with John, he was posted to the school in May of the current year. Nick was teaching a few subjects, namely, English, Moral Education, Physical Education and Information Communications and Technology (ICT). Specifically, Nick teaches English in Year 2 and Year 3. Overall, he teaches English classes for 10 periods per week. Other than his role as an English teacher, Nick is also the Examination Secretary along with Jane. The interview with Nick was conducted during the examination week and as the Examination Secretary he had to administer the distribution of examination papers for all classes. Occasionally, the interview was interrupted as teachers came in and out to either collect the new examination papers or to collect the submitted examination papers. Despite these interruptions, Nick was particularly responsive to the questions and managed to provide detailed elaboration to the researcher. However, he was quite hesitant to participate in the classroom observation as teachers' schedules were rather packed with preparation for events before the year ended. Furthermore, he believed that other teachers were more suitable to be observed as they had more experience in teaching than he did.

#### **4.3.6 Linda**

Prior to the interview with Linda, the school's assistant headmaster had introduced Linda to the researcher while the researcher was interviewing Nick. Linda was supportive and appeared open to the idea of being interviewed. Linda was a teacher who had graduated from one of the teacher education institutes in Malaysia and had 26 years of teaching experience. Her first posting to a school was in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia. Furthermore, Linda was the only teacher in the

school who had attended the Loving Teacher (*Guru Penyayang*) course, noting that teachers today could no longer attend the course as it had been discontinued. Due to her knowledge and her experience from attending the course, Linda has been teaching Year 1 students since 2012. Owing to her long experience with young students, she has established positive and loving attitudes towards her students. Linda was also incredibly responsive during the interview. She provided comprehensive explanations on certain matters. During the interview, her main concern seemed to be the Performance Standard. The interview with Linda took place in the school library as it was quieter, thus making the interview process easier. However, it was quite difficult to set an appointment time with her due to her busy schedule. Nevertheless, based on the researcher's observation, Linda really put an effort into the classroom observation. She incorporated the use of technology with a laptop and a projector utilised during the observation. Linda admitted she was not quite familiar with the technology thus, when she faced some technical issues prior to the lesson, the researcher managed to assist her in setting up both the laptop and the projector.

#### **4.3.7 Suzy**

Suzy was also a teacher who had graduated from one of the teacher education institutes in Malaysia. She was posted to her first school, the current school, in 2014, indicating that she has three years of teaching experience. At the current school, she was teaching two subjects, Mathematics and English. Although Suzy was teaching Mathematics as a major, she has had to teach English due to the limited number of English teachers in the school. As she was teaching Mathematics more than she was teaching English, she was teaching Mathematics for eight periods per week, compared to English for six periods per week. Suzy was also teaching Health Education and Music. She was teaching English to a Year 3 class in which her students had mixed

levels of proficiency. The interview with Suzy was carried out in the school library as it was deemed to be more suitable and comfortable. The observation with Suzy was not exactly an observation of a lesson. When the researcher set the scheduled time with Suzy, the examination week had passed, and Suzy was at the stage of discussing the examination papers with her students. Nevertheless, the researcher still attended, believing that something could still be learnt from the observation.

#### **4.3.8 Summary of Participant Data Collection**

The data collected for this study included interviews, classroom observations, reflections and document collection. However, it is important to note that most of the data were obtained from interviews and classroom observations. The researcher managed to collect some data that were confidential; thus, these data are not revealed. However, they were included in the analysis and discussion part of the study. A total of seven teachers were interviewed from both schools. The researcher managed to arrange two classroom observations from the two schools, each with different teachers. Initially, the researcher intended to obtain teachers' reflections post-lesson, but not every teacher who participated in classroom observations agreed to participate in reflections. Nonetheless, the reflection document was collected as one of the relevant documents from teachers who were willing to share information. Another way of collecting relevant documents was by taking photos for documentation with permission from the teacher. The researcher believed that this was another way to obtain valid support for the study's findings, thus supporting the triangulation of the data being analysed.

#### **4.4 Findings**

The study's findings are presented according to the themes that emerged following data analysis. The first subsection focuses on teachers' understanding and attitudes towards school-based assessment. The second subsection presents the themes that emerged from the assessment methods used in the ESL classroom, which included observation, questioning, worksheets/exercises, pair/group work, quizzes and educational games. Furthermore, feedback, one of the themes that emerged from the findings, is presented in the third subsection. The fourth subsection presents the themes that arose when identifying teachers' perceptions of administering school-based assessment, namely, teachers' knowledge and practice, time constraints, the purpose of assessment, unclear meaning and lack of an exercise bank for lower-level students.

##### **4.4.1 Teachers' Understanding and Attitudes towards School-based Assessment (SBA)**

To examine the methods of assessment in the ESL classroom at two selected national primary schools, the researcher first questioned teachers' understanding of school-based assessment. This approach helped to obtain comprehensive insights into whether teachers had conducted early literacy assessment practice in line with the current assessment system. All participant teachers provided different definitions or a different understanding of school-based assessment even though some were closely related.

According to Lucy, school-based assessment was an assessment carried out all year round and not limited to an examination. She mentioned that teachers had to fill in forms throughout the year using a pencil, as this made it easier to edit what was written on the form. In addition, school-based assessment was not limited to academic aspects, but included other types of assessment, such as behaviour as well as other

elements which Lucy could not recall at the time of the interview. She mentioned that students would also undergo a psychometric assessment. She concluded that teachers basically had to assess students holistically. Lucy commented that she did not assess all her students at the same time, but instead in groups of three. She mentioned that the assessment could be carried out twice a year, once at mid-year and second time at the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Ashley explained that school-based assessment was informal and a more subjective assessment than tests and examinations. She strongly believed that school-based assessment mostly involved observation. As Ashley had eight years of teaching experience, she had prior experience in assessing students before the implementation of school-based assessment in Malaysia's education system. According to Ashley, before school-based assessment was implemented, the previous system allowed teachers to learn and measure students' progress only through examinations. However, students' examination results did not provide a holistic overview of their progress, with these results mostly based on their ability to memorise and their knowledge of the topic. Conversely, within school-based assessment, teachers were able to assess their students over a wider range, going beyond academic aspects to include their communication skills, social interaction, level of cooperation and moral values.

Meanwhile, Jane, with nine years of teaching experience, defined school-based assessment as a type of measurement used by teachers to indirectly assess students. She stated that the purpose of the assessment was to identify whether students understood what was being taught. For example, when teaching students phonics, she would ask her students to pronounce the word to see if the pronunciation was correct. Jane believed that she had been practising the elements of school-based assessment,

specifically by asking questions during class and keeping track of students' progress and records even before school-based assessment was officially implemented in Malaysia's national education system. The main difference between then and now, in Jane's view, was the formality in both types of assessment and the existence of bands. As she explained, previously, she would observe her students and take note of their progress for her personal reference and not for other units or stakeholders. Before school-based assessment was implemented, she would classify her students as 'able' and 'unable'. However, school-based assessment today has bands in the Performance Standard against which teachers are to classify students' progress. Jane also explained the difference between formative and summative assessment, stating that summative assessment was when students answered in an examination, while formative assessment was carried out informally within the classroom. Furthermore, formative assessment allowed her as a teacher to learn about her students' progress in learning.

In contrast, John was honest in admitting that he did not remember much about school-based assessment although he did learn about it before he graduated. Thus, he could not provide much information on what he knew about school-based assessment. However, the researcher tried to probe to learn if John remembered anything at all. The researcher asked him if he thought an element that he practised in his class was related to school-based assessment. John made the effort to share how he would assess students and explained that he practised SMART (specific, measurable with measurement, achievable, relevant, time-oriented) objectives in his lessons and assessments. Referring to the lesson carried out during the observation, John explained that his focus was to ensure his students understood diversity. To measure his students' understanding, he would provide exercises to his students and would look at their answers. He also explained that, from a total of four questions, he would set as his

target that students must have at least two right answers. He would thus consider his objective had been achieved if his students could correctly answer at least two out of four questions. The objective was measured by numbers. John also highlighted that different skills would have different objectives.

Similarly, Nick also did not remember much about school-based assessment. From what he understood, school-based assessment was related to the bands through which students were categorised, based on bands provided by the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

Linda commented that the previous assessment system had an over-emphasis on students' results. She explained that, regardless of the syllabus, at the end of the day, assessment went back to how many 'As' a student received. Linda also highlighted that the KBSR had a streaming system through which students were classified into first class, second class, etc. She emphasised that the line was drawn when a student did not score an 'A' in the examination. However, Linda stated that, when school-based assessment was implemented, it was completely the opposite to the Integrated Primary School Curriculum (KBSR). During the interview, when the issue of school-based assessment was discussed, the researcher noticed that Linda was trying to be neutral, being neither too positive nor too negative. With her explanation, she tried to provide the pros and cons to avoid sounding like she was taking sides. According to her, school-based assessment gives the school more freedom to assess the child holistically. However, as a result of this flexibility, Linda pointed out that the system is not synchronised, with no standardised examination for students because different schools would have different examination papers. She also highlighted that she was confused with the definitions provided for the bands and with the point that different

teachers had different interpretations of the meanings of each band which resulted in conflicting marks being given to students.

Suzy was very upfront with her comments when she was asked about school-based assessment. She felt that school-based assessment was burdensome and redundant as students would be assessed through their examinations regardless. Moreover, Suzy understood that school-based assessment required teachers to assess students on aspects beyond their academic performance. It evaluated students' behaviour, attitudes and other non-academic aspects in a holistic way. Although Suzy felt that school-based assessment was good for lower primary school students, it created another workload for teachers through having to provide evidence and other requirements of the school-based assessment system. Suzy also admitted that she did not really understand the bands as defined in the Performance Standard. Hence, she always gave students an average band, mentioning that she was scared to give students a high mark like Band 6.

#### **4.4.2 Methods of Early Literacy Assessment in the ESL Classroom at Primary School Level**

Before the method of assessment practised by teachers in the ESL classroom could be understood, it was important to know what they were teaching to understand their selected assessment method. Throughout the interviews, different teachers highlighted different skills or knowledge that they assessed.

All participants were teachers who taught English and other subjects and who had teaching experience ranging from five months to 26 years. The researcher discovered several methods used in conducting early literacy assessment in the classroom. Overall, each teacher had different preferences in deciding the best method to assess their own students.



The interview findings revealed that the methods used by teachers to assess students' early literacy included: observation, questioning, interaction, worksheets, quizzes and working in pairs or group work. Table 4.1 below presents the methods used by teachers to assess students.

**Table 4.1**

*Assessment Methods Preferred by Teachers (from Interviews)*

ASSESSMENT METHOD	TEACHERS						
	Lucy	Ashley	Jane	John	Nick	Linda	Suzy
Observation		✓	✓	✓			✓
Questioning	✓				✓		
Quiz				✓			
Task/Worksheet	✓	✓			✓		✓
Pair/Group Activity	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Drills			✓	✓			
Educational Games					✓	✓	✓
Test	✓				✓	✓	✓
Interaction/Participation		✓				✓	
Form		✓	✓				

This study was carried out in a qualitative manner. Thus, Table 4.1 only shows the methods that teachers preferred to use to assess their students. The table reveals that the most frequent method used by these teachers to assess students' early literacy was working in pairs or conducting a group activity. The next most preferred methods were observation, task or worksheet, and test. Educational games were revealed as the third most preferred method. Assessment by methods such as drills, interaction or participation, and filling in forms was mentioned occasionally by the participant teachers. Lastly, questioning and quizzes were the methods preferred least by teachers. Although questioning was the least preferred method according to these teachers, this contrasted with what the researcher discovered during the classroom observation. It is important however to note that these themes emerged following analysis of the data collected from all sources.

## A. Observation

Ashley believed that observation was the most effective method of assessing students' early literacy. She believed that the teacher must get to know their students well by learning and understanding their attitudes, behaviour and their overall well-being. Although it seemed strange to observe students' attitudes and behaviour to assess their early literacy, Ashley elaborated that this provided a richer background enabling her to understand what was happening to her students and their progress. She also emphasised the importance of learning and understanding a student's background to provide the assessment that best suited the student. Ashley also believed that school-based assessment not only allowed teachers to assess students' academic performance, but also other aspects such as their moral values, teamwork and interpersonal skills.

*Most effective is ... obviously, um, the observation. Cause you get to know the students well and you're not just focusing on their academic progress; you're also focusing on their overall well-being, and, uh, their attitude in class, their moral values, teamwork, you're looking at all that. So, although it's a little bit objective – in some ways a bit subjective – but I believe it gives a whole picture of what's happening to a student.*

Ashley, Interview, L114-L120

This perception was also supported by John who believed that one of the important skills that a teacher must have to assess students' early literacy is the ability to identify and understand their behaviour. According to him, a student's behaviour in class often provides clues about whether the student understood what was being taught or had good proficiency in the subject. John assumed that if their proficiency was good, it would be reflected in their behaviour in class. For example, students would cooperate well when pronouncing words during a learning session. To support his hypothesis, John provided an example of a situation during the second classroom observation. During this observation, he asked one of the students to read aloud a passage in the

textbook. The student purposely read the text at low volume. As John observed, he noticed the lack of confidence projected by the student when reading aloud at low volume and encouraged the student to read louder.

*(A student was called upon to read aloud the fourth paragraph. The student read the paragraph so low the researcher could not hear it.)*

*John : Louder, louder*

*Student : (student continues reading)*

John, Classroom observation, IMG\_3373

John later explained during the interview that when a student read the text at low volume, this meant they had low proficiency. Thus, it indicated their lack of confidence in speaking. During the classroom observation, John called upon another student who read the text aloud with confidence, with John explaining to the researcher that this was an example of a proficient student. In contrast, if students have poor proficiency, the teacher can observe students' tell-tale signs such as their facial expressions, their non-verbal actions, their passiveness, or disturbance by friends.

Lucy stated that teachers must always be alert to use observation. This means that they not only must keep their eyes open during the lesson but also their ears 'open' to listen to students' mispronunciation during the lesson and assessment. This was shown during the classroom observation of John's lesson in which he was teaching the topic "Months in a Year" to Year 3 students. He instructed the students to listen to him reading the text and to repeat afterwards what he had said. When he reached February, he repeated the word 'twenty-eight (28)' to the students.

*John : From 28 days*

*Students : From 28 days*

*John : From*

*Students : From*

*John : From*

*Students : From*

*John : Twenty-eight*

*Students* : *Twenty-eight*  
*John* : *Twenty*  
*Students* : *Twenty*  
*John* : *Eight*  
*Students* : *Eight*  
*John* : *Eight*  
*Students* : *Eight*  
*John* : *Eight*  
*Students* : *Eight*  
*John* : *Days*

John, Classroom Observation, IMG\_2530

John observed the students to assess their skills in pronunciation with the word 'eight'. He asked the students to repeat the word until he heard correct pronunciation before proceeding to the next word. In the teacher's reflection form that he completed, John stated that he planned to assess students' pronunciation through reading and would take note of those who had problems with reading.

John also incorporated quizzes as another method of assessing students' early literacy. Prior to the quiz, he would practise the pronunciation with students at any time during the lesson. During the quiz session, he would randomly ask a student to pronounce a word that he had written on the whiteboard. John would ask the student to pronounce the word aloud in class. In addition, he would observe words that were difficult for students to read and would take note of these words for future reference. He would also categorise the students in accordance with their levels of proficiency, such as weak, intermediate or advanced.

Meanwhile, Jane's observation of her students' early literacy was not done directly, but more by informal assessment. By observing how her students answered her questions during the lesson, Jane was able to identify her students' progress at that moment. As was the case with Lucy, Jane used a form to check on her students' progress after the observation. However, she did not rely solely on the observation to assess her students' early literacy but would also use an examination. Jane shared one

experience in which, during pronunciation drills in class, one of her students seemed to be doing well. However, Jane discovered the student's weaknesses comprehensively through examination.

As with Ashley, Suzy would use the observation method to measure her students' performance, cooperation, interpersonal skills, attitudes and behaviour. Suzy also commented that if a student was considered proficient but was lacking in manners, she would give the student an average band. Therefore, to be fair, Suzy preferred to give all her students an average mark. She mentioned that she would not give her students a Band 6 as she was scared of giving a full band to her students and it was also because she wanted to be fair to her students.

## **B. Questioning**

The interview findings revealed that only two of the seven teachers mentioned the use of questioning as a means of assessing students' early literacy. Lucy, although teaching English, was qualified to teach Mathematics as a major. However, in the current year, she was only teaching Year 4. She had taught the lower primary level, specifically Year 3, in the previous year. Despite not teaching any lower-level primary class, Lucy shared her experiences on how she assessed her students. She mentioned that she rarely used questioning during her lesson to assess her students while teaching.

On the other hand, Jane stated that she had been practising formative assessment before school-based assessment was implemented in Malaysia. She commented that it was essential to observe and take notes of students' progress for teaching and learning purposes. Earlier, it was mentioned that Jane observed how her students answered her questions in class. This indicated that she had been using the questioning method in her lessons to assess her students' early literacy. Indeed, during

the classroom observation, Jane used many questions to measure students' understanding of the topic. On the day of the classroom observation, Jane was teaching the topic 'Money' to Year 1 students. Students came from various backgrounds but mostly from low to middle-income families. Thus, their proficiency in English was regarded as being at an average level. Jane began her lesson by showing an example of a large cash note to students and asked them what was in her hand. However, only a few students paid attention while some were not really focusing on her lesson. Throughout the observation, Jane asked her students many questions.

*Jane* : (showing a [Malaysian ringgit] RM10 note) Okay, how much do we call this one?  
*Students* : Money  
*Jane* : (now speaking in Malay) Berapa ni? [How much is this?]  
*Jane* : 10?  
*Student A* : Money  
*Jane* : 10 ... Ringgit

Jane, Classroom observation, IMG\_2536

Instances also occurred in which Jane would answer her own questions.

*Jane* : (showing a 50-cent coin) Berapa ni? [How much is this?]  
*Student* : 50 sen!  
*Jane* : In English? This one is? 50 sen? What do we call 50 sen in English?  
*Jane* : 50 ...?  
*Jane* : 50 cents ...

Jane, Classroom observation, IMG\_2536

During the observation, Jane also took the time to assess the pronunciation by one of her students of the word 'LINUS' (Luyee et al., 2015) while the other students were doing their work. Prior to the assessment, Jane pronounced the word, then pronounced the word's phoneme.

Similarly, John used the questioning method to assess his students' early literacy. While other students were doing exercises, John called one student to assess his pronunciation on certain words.

*John : Number 2. What is this?*

*Student : Fawn*

*John : Okay, what is the sound?*

*John : 'A' plus 'W', what is the sound?*

*Student : 'aw'*

*John : Okay, what is this?*

*Student : 'law'*

*John : Okay, that is correct. (points to letter N) What is this? The sound?*

*Student : 'lawn'*

*[Interrupted by another student asking John a question]*

John, Classroom observation, IMG\_2530

On the other hand, Nick did not prefer the questioning method for assessing students' early literacy. He believed that this method did not give students enough time to think of the answer, particularly students with lower proficiency. Nick appeared empathetic to his students when he explained that students would have to think fast when they were prompted with questions. According to Nick, the questioning method did not seem fair as it gave students little time for self-preparation. Nick believed that the questioning method would be more suitable for students of higher proficiency. He also elaborated that the questioning method should be an interactive session where students could ask the teacher questions as well as vice versa. However, Nick asked his students simple questions about their comprehension.

*For example, we ask 'What's the shape – what colour is the turtle' so they know the characteristics of the turtle.*

Nick, Interview, L259-L260

Meanwhile, during their interviews, Linda and Suzy did not mention using the questioning method to assess students' early literacy in their classes. However, the

observations revealed that both used the questioning method to assess their students' progress during the lesson.

*Linda* : (Showing a photo of a dragon) *It's a what? It's a ... ?*  
*Students* : *Dragon!*

Linda, Classroom observation, IMG\_6446

*Linda* : (showing a video of 'Let It Go') *Elsa – she's a ... ?*  
*Students* : *Princess!*  
*Linda* : (nods) *Princess.*

Linda, Classroom observation, IMG\_6450

### C. Worksheets/Exercises

Different teachers applied different approaches when it came to providing worksheets or exercises to students. For instance, Lucy used the textbook to teach her students vocabulary. In addition, the school library had sufficient materials to help students in their learning. During the interview, Lucy recalled one of the methods she had used when teaching vocabulary to Year 3 students. She brought students to the library and had them look up meanings of words in both English and Malay. A week later, she would follow up with a spelling test based on the words they had learned the previous week. Lucy would give her students at least 10 words to spell, from which she would assess their vocabulary. Moreover, she affirmed that she would have some materials photocopied and ready for students in each class.

Ashley mentioned during her interview that marking her students' books or activity books allowed her to see their progress.

*So, and, of course through the interaction with the students and marking their books, their activity books and their participation in class, we would already get a rough idea on the learner.*

Ashley, Interview, L86-L88



*It's that, and another one is obviously the activities; the activity books, worksheets ...*

Ashley, Interview, L92

Ashley would then fill in a progressive form to keep a check on her students' progress. Nevertheless, the final results of the exercises were not the only method that she used to assess her students. Her assessment of her students was inclusive of how they completed the work, their teamwork and their interpersonal skills.

During the interview, Jane shared one of her experiences in which she mis-evaluated a student by checking her work in class. According to Jane, one of her students did really good work in class, with everything written in neat handwriting. However, her good performance in class was not reflected in the examination result. Jane learnt from that situation to never assess a student's performance solely on the exercises done in class.

*Sebab ada macam seorang budaku dalam kelas saya, dia punya apa tu kalau kerja dia paling cepat, tulisan paling cantik, paling kemas. [Because there's one student in my class who finishes her work the fastest, with neatest handwriting and work].*

Jane, Interview, L227-L228

*Tapi bila kita tengok dalam periksa, rupanya dia banyak salah. [But when we look during examination, she made a lot of mistakes].*

Jane, Interview, L230

John also used exercises to assess his students' early literacy, although he did not mention this specifically during the interview. However, the researcher managed to learn this information when John explained the feedback that he gave on work that students had submitted. During the classroom observation, students came to ask John some questions about what they did not understand. In the teacher's reflection document, John wrote that one of his methods for assessing his students was to mark students' submitted answers based on the four questions he had asked. Overall, John

was open and welcoming in responding to his students' queries. He even facilitated the understanding of his weaker students so they could answer the questions in the textbook.

Nick preferred to give worksheets to his students as it allowed him to clearly determine students' capability regardless of whether they could answer the questions. He strongly believed that giving worksheets was a way to assess students' early literacy, allowing them plenty of time and sufficient preparation to think of the answers. Nick believed that using worksheets was part of the formative assessment currently being practised by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. When he was asked what a teacher must do to effectively and accurately assess students' early literacy, Nick referred to the worksheets.

*Mungkin task sheet [Perhaps task sheet].*

Nick, Interview, L312

*Ya, cause we know how, macam mana dorang boleh jawab ke tidak. [Yes, because we know how, how they can answer].*

Nick, Interview, L314

*Sebab [Because] ... because they got time to answer the questions, they can think.*

Nick, Interview, L316

According to Nick, a teacher must provide two worksheets to the class. The first worksheet was the normal worksheet that every student in the class would have to do to complete the lesson. The second worksheet was an enrichment sheet that would be provided to advanced students who completed the first worksheet earlier than other students in the class. Nick explained that the enrichment sheet was slightly more difficult than the first one. It provided enough challenges for students to complete, thus leaving them with without the opportunity to do nothing in class. Nick said that a

remedial task sheet would be given to weaker students but only if they really needed the assistance. However, the preparation of that sheet would depend on the individual teacher.

In contrast, Linda mentioned various methods that she used to assess her students' early literacy. Worksheets or exercises were not emphasised as her main or preferred practice in assessing her students' early literacy. According to her, her students would have three exercise books labelled Book 1, Book 2 and Book 3. The weaker students would have LINUS books (Luyee et al., 2015) as their exercise book. For Year 3 students who were going into greater depth in grammar lesson, the students were required to do grammar exercises.

#### **D. Pair/Group Work**

The interview findings revealed that several teachers conducted work in pairs or group work to assess their students' early literacy.

Lucy did not explicitly mention that she conducted pair or group work to assess her students. However, the researcher identified the method when Lucy was explaining how she provided feedback to her students.

*Kalau groupwork, kalau buat groupwork, uhm, biasanya kalau group kan kita kena suruh budak tunjuk kat depan apa dia buat kan. Betul masa tu je la. [If in group work, if we do group work, usually in group work, we ask the students to present in front what they did right. So, we rectify [the work] during that time].*

Lucy, Interview, L151-L153

Similarly, Ashley did not mention the use of pair or group work in assessing her students' early literacy. This specific method of assessing her students' early literacy was clarified when she explained giving feedback to students after observing their behaviour in working in pairs or in a group activity.

On the other hand, Jane used group work as one of the means to assess students' early literacy. She believed that group work gave her more time to assess her students. Jane also commented that having her students doing things in a group, made it easier for her to assess their progress. She elaborated that she would normally divide her class of students into groups of four or five. She would then call students to the front, based on the number of their group, and ask them to present explanation to their group. After she had briefed all the groups, Jane would walk around to observe her students' progress. She emphasised the importance of checking their work.

Suzy believed that conducting group work was the most effective way to assess students' early literacy. She would call group leaders to the front and explain the important information and instructions to them. Group leaders would then return to their groups and teach their group members. Suzy would assess her students by providing a worksheet on which they were required to submit their work and would call them if any mistake required further explanation. Suzy reported that she had noticed some improvement by students when she practised this method to assess their early literacy.

It is interesting to note that neither Linda nor John mentioned or observed the use of working in pairs or group work to assess their students' early literacy in the classroom.

#### **E. Quiz**

Lucy, Ashley and Jane did not mention the use of quizzes to assess their students' early literacy. However, John reported that he used quizzes in his class, believing that this was one of the most effective ways to assess his students' early literacy, particularly in relation to pronunciation.

*Quiz tu, saya take note siapa yang boleh siapa yang tak boleh. Saya assess one by one. [That quiz, I take note of those who can, those who cannot. I assess one by one].*

John, Interview, L282-L283

*Supaya saya boleh category kan yang mana yang lemah, yang mana yang intermediate, yang mana yang ini. [So that I can categorise those who are weak, intermediate, and so and so].*

John, Interview, L286-L287

John elaborated that, as a drilling practice, he would pronounce a word and his students were required to follow him by repeating the word three times. He would then proceed with the quiz. He would write the word on the whiteboard and randomly ask a student to pronounce the word. Other than to assess their pronunciation, the purpose of the quiz was to observe if the drilling process was effective or not. During the quiz session, John would take note of words that his students could not pronounce to identify the category of proficiency that these students fell into, whether they were weak, intermediate or advanced students. In addition, during the quiz session, he would know who and on what to focus for the next lesson.

- List of students from 3 Anggerik with further need of attentions.
1. Musyrit = lack of knowledge in identifying nouns and verbs.
  2. Danish Absyar = need more focus for SVA (subject verb agreement).
  3. Fanishah = lack of focus in class, low level of vocab,
  4. Amir Hazim = ~~low~~ <sup>lack</sup> focus in class, high level of vocab but unable to use for SVA.
  5. Aliff Khayulkah = focus and attentive in class but a slow learner. need more attention when doing activity and more exercises to apply the knowledge.

**Figure 4.1 Sample of Notes Taken by John While Assessing his Students**

## F. Educational Games

Only three of the seven teachers who were interviewed and observed mentioned the use of educational games for assessing their students. Nick preferred to use the 'Hangman' game to test his students' vocabulary. He claimed that this game allowed his students to learn new words in an interactive way. Subsequently, Nick would use those words in his lesson to make the activity meaningful to his students.

Meanwhile, Linda used a variety of fun educational games, such as word puzzles and singing in her class, especially for weaker students in Year 1.

*... that's why [in] Standard 1 there'll be a lot of songs for this, this whole group who cannot ... because I'm basically in that class, the class where they cannot read, so the songs are for them.*

Linda, Interview, L800-L802

Linda also encouraged her Year 1 students to come out front and use the whiteboard as a way of supporting their concentration and participation. Suzy used the educational game 'VLE Frog' provided by the Ministry.

*Saya boleh tengok la dekat situ. Saya pun ambil penilaian dekat situ la. [I can observe from there. I also take that as assessment].*

Suzy, Interview, L332-L334

Suzy reported that her students really loved the game. She also used it to check on the points that her students had obtained while playing it.

These educational games might have seemed like they were being used more for teaching and learning sessions, but formative assessment was also being carried out.

#### 4.4.3 Feedback

Giving feedback is inseparable from the whole process of teaching and learning and from assessment itself. In the interviews, Lucy was the only teacher who commented that she gave direct feedback to students, in both verbal and written form. She often used a more direct approach, elaborating that if her students made a mistake, she would immediately tell them it was wrong or inaccurate. However, if the mistake occurred in group work, she would tell them where and mark it with a red marker pen.

Ashley provided feedback based on her observation of her students. She would assign students to group work and observe their participation and the interaction between each group's members. If she noticed a student not behaving normally on the first day, she would usually give the student a day or two before interfering. According to her, sometimes a student was not well or he/she was simply having a bad day. If the student continued with such behaviour, she would then give feedback directly to the student.

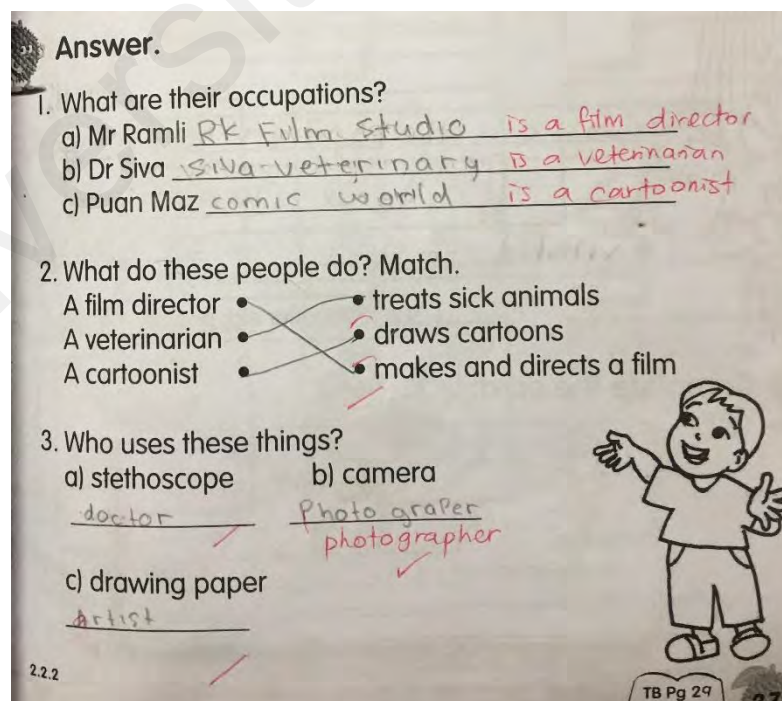
*... after a few days, you seem to realise that the students are not participating so that's when I give feedback ... I will – I can suggest to the student to participate, help their friend[s], basically like that.*

Ashley, Interview, L128-134

As for Jane, she would provide both verbal and written feedback to her students. Using verbal feedback, she would ask all her students whether they understood the matter or not. Her first explanation would be to all students and she would provide additional exercises to test her students' understanding. However, if students still did not understand the explanation, she would call the students one by one and explain it to them individually. Jane provided an example of when she did a writing exercise for LINUS (Luyee et al., 2015). One of her students did not appear to understand the task; however, when she called the student forward, the student was

able to answer the question during the one-on-one session. Meanwhile, in terms of written feedback, Jane would draw a circle around her student's error to indicate where the error occurred. In giving feedback, she would give credit to her students for their effort before informing them of their mistakes. For instance, in the examination, when her students only copied the words into the blank spaces, she would give them one mark for their effort to write rather than leaving empty spaces. She would then explain and encourage her students to add any additional words, such as conjunctions, so she could give them more marks.

Meanwhile, John commented on two kinds of feedback: one to students and the other receiving feedback from students. He would provide feedback to his students in both written and verbal form. John believed that the marking technique played an important role in providing students with feedback. Below is an example of how he corrected his students' mistakes in their exercise books.



**Figure 4.2 John's Written Feedback to His Students**



When providing verbal feedback, John ensured that he did not directly inform his students of their mistakes, believing that this might demotivate them. Instead, he would inform students that they were almost there with the right answer, but that they could use a better method or that a better answer could be given. John would also incorporate written feedback by crossing out the wrong answer and writing the correct answer above so students could see that a better answer could be given to the question. Apart from giving feedback to his students, John would also take feedback from his students. When his students mentioned that they did not understand, he accepted this as feedback for him. As an improvement, he would code-switch and speak in Bahasa Malaysia with them.

*(A student came to ask John a question, indicating the book)*

*John : Okay, what did he do last week? The one that we eat?*

*Student: Tak faham (I don't understand)*

*John : Apa yang kita makan haritu? What's the name?*

*John : Salad ...*

John, Classroom observation, IMG\_2530

John would also use feedback from his students to identify weaker students so he knew on whom to focus in the next lesson.

As with John, Nick was very mindful and considerate in giving feedback to his students. In his explanation to the researcher, it was apparent that he felt the teacher should not directly comment by stating that an answer was wrong. Instead, the teacher must compliment students' efforts in trying to answer a question before informing them of any mistakes. Nick strongly believed that a teacher must not give harsh comments to students.

*Macam kalau dia buat salah, kita janganlah komen cakap salah ... jangan beritahu secara direct, "awak punya ni salah. Ha, ejaan dia salah!" Tak boleh ...*

*[If they make mistakes, we cannot give comments saying it is wrong ... do not tell them directly "yours is wrong. Ha, this spelling is wrong!" Cannot ...]*

Nick, Interview, L358-L361

Nick believed that teachers must firstly compliment students as a way of gently delivering the comment to avoid generating a fear of answering questions among students.

*Sebab kalau tersilap cakap nanti, dia orang takut nak jawab for the next question. Dia akan tergagap-gagap sebab takut dia salah.  
[Because if you say it wrongly, they will be afraid to answer the next question. They will stutter because they are afraid of being wrong.]*

Nick, Interview, L367-368

The researcher observed Nick's intonation when he expressed his views on giving feedback to students. It was apparent that Nick was a highly empathetic and compassionate teacher who cared about his students' feelings and was aware of how feedback could impact on their learning process. Nick stated that feedback given in exercise books or the textbook was too direct. For example, if a student made a mistake, the teacher should circle the error to indicate the wrong answer. It was highly possible that students would be unlikely to go through the previous exercise and look back at the feedback. Nick believed that the best feedback was verbal feedback, as it would ensure that students received their feedback as they had to listen whereas, with written feedback, students might be more likely to dismiss or overlook the feedback.

In the case of Suzy, her classroom observation was done after the examination was held. Hence, the observation on how Suzy provided feedback was captured in both written and verbal forms. In Figures 4.3 and 4.4 below, examples are presented of an examination paper in which Suzy marked the wrong answer without correction and one in which she marked the paper with correction.

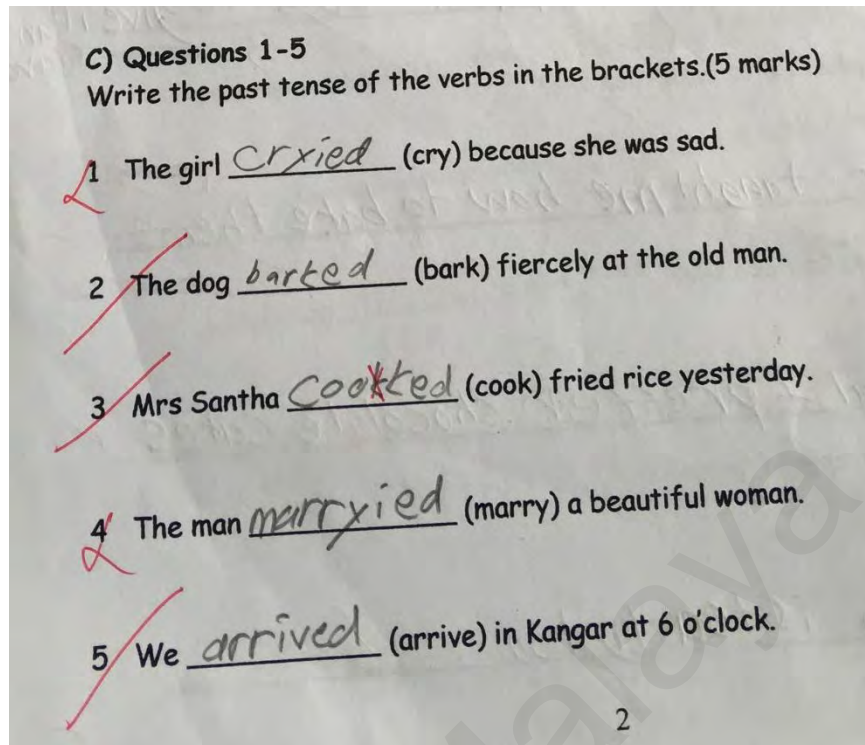


Figure 4.3 Suzy's Marking Without Correction

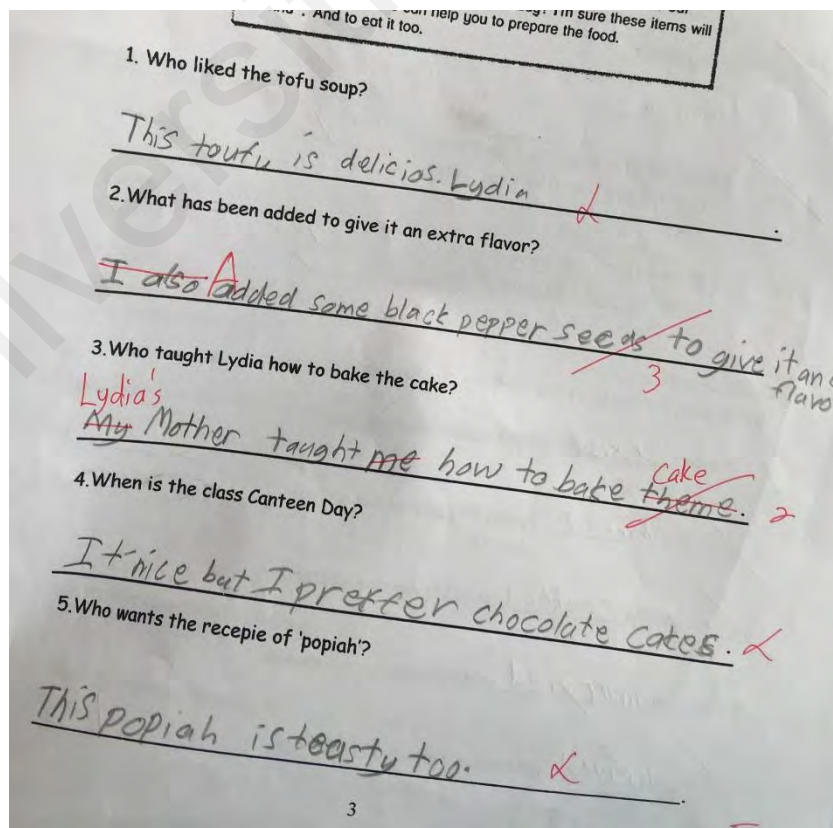


Figure 4.4 Suzy's Marking With Correction

The observation revealed that Suzy would initiate a discussion by asking how many students answered the question with the wrong answer. She would follow this with her prompt, asking her students how they decided on the wrong answer. Subsequently, she would proceed to explain how the students could get the right answer. This observation also corroborated her statement during the interview.

*Saya tanya, "Siapa salah yang ni, angkat tangan". Pastu saya pun terangkan dekat depan.  
[I will ask, "Who got this wrong, raise your hand". Then I will explain in front [of them].]*

Suzy, Interview, L657-658

Suzy commented that, during the class, she would explain the right answers to her students and ask them to make the corrections. She would explain whatever topic her students did not understand in front of the class so that everyone understood and could learn. Again, this statement was supported during the observation in the excerpt below.

*(The student was asked to read a passage. Suzy then tells the student to stop at a sentence.)*

*Suzy : Look at number 1, question number 1.*

*Suzy : (reads aloud the question)*

*Students : Sarina*

*Suzy : Ha ... Sarina and? Kumari. You look at this dialogue. It says, 'it's very tasty'*

*Student : (asks something)*

*Suzy : Because you put just sarina. If you put sarina and kumari then you got three. Ha, there's your mistake.*

Suzy, Classroom Observation, IMG\_5826

According to Suzy, if students were still unclear about it, they would come and ask her personally.

In the interviews, the researcher discovered that all teacher participants provided feedback to their students. However, the apparent difference was how straightforward the teacher was in giving feedback to students. Throughout the process

of analysing the data, the researcher experienced a strengthening of the idea that assessment, particularly school-based assessment, was very much related to teaching and learning. In other words, almost every time these teachers discussed assessment, the discussion returned to the teaching and learning process.

#### **4.4.4 Teachers' Perceptions of Administering Early Literacy Assessment in ESL Classrooms**

##### **A. Teachers' Knowledge and Preparation**

When these teachers were asked about the challenges that they faced in assessing students' early literacy, Lucy was not hesitant in mentioning that her skills and knowledge in the subject she was teaching were weak. She elaborated that, as she was teaching the upper primary level (Year 4 to Year 6), she had to make prior preparations as this level used a higher level of language compared to the basic language used at the lower primary level. For instance, she even admitted that, prior to her class, especially in grammar or writing, she would have to study these topics first to ensure that she was teaching her students correctly.

*Sebab saya mengaku saya pun macam lemah juga la, macam grammar semua tu, saya nak kena tengok balik. Kalau saya salah, budak mesti salah. So nak kena tengok balik. [Because I admit that I am quite weak too; for example, in grammar, I need to revise. If I'm wrong, [my] students will be wrong, so I need to revise].*

Lucy, Interview, L197-199

Lucy highlighted that she realised the importance of teaching her students correctly. Thus, she undertook her own efforts by studying beforehand to ensure that her students would learn the right thing. Despite having supportive colleagues, Lucy understood that teachers have a large amount of work to do; thus, she felt she could not frequently ask them for guidance.

Suzy's and Lucy's cases were similar. Suzy realised that teaching English was not her strength, as Mathematics was her major field. Nevertheless, she made the effort to learn about the language and was still learning to improve herself.

*Cabaran saya, saya ni Inggeris saya belajar lagi la. Saya tak pandai sangat English, tapi, saya belajar la juga kan. [My challenge is [that] I'm still learning English. I am not so good in English, but I'm learning].*

Suzy, Interview, L899-L900

Suzy admitted that when she was posted to the school, she felt inferior when speaking English in front of her Year 1 students as most of them, at that time, mainly spoke English. However, she was grateful to be surrounded by supportive colleagues and she slowly developed her confidence in speaking English.

On the other hand, John believed that one of his challenges was his own lack of knowledge of, and preparation for, teaching and assessing students. He elaborated that this could be due to his status as a fresh graduate and a new teacher.

*Preparation samada ilmu yang saya ada tu cukup ke tak untuk cope dengan situasi budak. Bagi saya tak cukup lagi la. [Preparation if the knowledge that I have is sufficient to cope with students' situation. For me, it is insufficient].*

John, Interview, L254-L255

*Sebab ah, masih banyak lagi benda yang saya kena belajar. [Because there is still a lot for me to learn].*

John, Interview, L257

Furthermore, John admitted that he had only been teaching at the school for five months at the time of the data collection. He realised that what he had learned in the teaching education institute was different from the real world. John also believed that we, as human beings, must constantly learn as we can never run from our mistakes. In that sense, he showed a positive attitude towards his challenges, for example, by constantly learning new things to improve his teaching and assessment methods. John

stated that he also learned from other teachers who shared their tips and tricks on social media networks such as Facebook. He commented that he preferred to follow what was designed by Malaysian teachers, assuming it to be suitable and applicable to the Malaysian context. Therefore, he felt it was more suitable for application in his classroom even though some modifications would be made to suit his students' needs. John strongly believed that catering to his students' needs was important, mentioning this point numerous times during the interview.

## **B. Time Constraints**

Only one teacher in this study brought up the issue of not having enough time to assess students' early literacy. Nick emphasised the issue of time constraints specifically during assessment of students' pronunciation. He described the assessment of students' pronunciation as a time-consuming process as it would take each student about 10–15 seconds to pronounce one word. Due to this constraint, he could not assess all students' pronunciation in one go, but instead targeted a few students per day for each skill.

*... I selalu buat, panggil, okay, tunjuk perkataan ni, dia aka nambil masa about 10 to 15 seconds dia akan diam, cuba sebut slow-slow ... bila dah confirm, baru dia akan sebut. Macam 'chair', dia akan 'ch- ch- cha-ir', like that la.*

*[What I always do is call the students, okay, I show this word, he/she will take about 10 to 15 seconds [when] he/she will be silent, try to pronounce the word slowly ... he/she will only pronounce the word once it is confirmed. For example, 'chair', he/she will say 'ch- ch- cha-ir' like that.*

Nick, Interview, L733-737

Although Nick was the only teacher who explicitly mentioned the issue of time constraints, Suzy expanded on the same issue in a different category. According to Suzy, she always had to rush to complete the work related to the assessment. For instance, a colleague would give her and another English teacher ad-hoc work which

they had to complete within a short period of time. Suzy emphasised that teachers today not only teach, but they also must do a large amount of administrative work. Thus, being given ad-hoc work at such short notice was very inconvenient for teachers. As she only has a short period of time, Suzy admitted that she was forced to complete the work in a dishonest manner.

*Isi markah senang je, yang nak menilaitu la. Kita macam menipu? Kita macam menipu je la sebab kita kalut-kalutkan.*

*[Filling in the marks is easy; it's the assessment part. It's like we're cheating ... We're cheating because we're in a hurry.]*

Suzy, Interview, L273, L275

Suzy further explained that when she was doing school-based assessment related work, she would always have to focus on that work and put her other work on hold due to the limited time. She even expressed her dislike of school-based assessment owing to the way in which it was being administered. In other words, this issue not only related to time, but also to time management.

### **C. Purpose of Assessment**

Most of the participant teachers believed that school-based assessment was good, but suggested that improvements could be made, adding that nothing was perfect. Ashley felt that the main implication of this system was that students were still focusing more on their grades and less on the moral aspect. She also noticed that students today stopped progressing in terms of their social behaviour when they were doing well in examinations. She felt that they thought and felt they were already good enough. Consequently, students were still finding their own levels solely based on their grades instead of holistic assessment. Ashley thought this was partly due to the previous system, the KSSR, that was very much oriented to examinations. She observed that the current assessment system had made a good start with a classroom-based assessment.



However, it had become more and more examination oriented throughout the years. This realisation by Ashley was shared 2–3 years after school-based assessment implementation.

Ashley highlighted that not only in her school, but in other schools, she and her colleagues were starting to receive feedback from parents on why their children were not receiving marks, asking how they were supposed to learn about their children's progress. She mentioned that many issues had arisen due to school-based assessment implementation. Feedback from parents had pushed her school into again holding examinations. As previously noted, Ashley had observed that assessment was starting to become an examination-oriented system as most schools were now again holding examinations. This change had been happening gradually over the course of the six years since school-based assessment was first implemented.

*Oh, because it was very exam oriented those days, KBSR, it was just exams. KSSR had a good start where it's fully assessment, classroom assessment-based and then, suddenly it's becoming more exam oriented. So, uh, I find it, it's quite sad that ... um.*

Ashley, Interview, L273-276

*That was in the initial stage and finally now, it's like everyone's conducting examinations. So, although in black and white it seems um, it's fully school-based assessment [SBA].*

Ashley, Interview, L286-288

*It's going back to square one, so that's a problem.*

Ashley, Interview, L284-291

Ashley informed the researcher that her friends in other schools had to prepare two examination papers for Year 3 students. She expressed her frustration and confusion about why many examinations were needed as these could stress and frustrate students.

Students were not the only group frustrated by the assessment system and examinations, as teachers were also affected. Nick and Suzy shared their frustration

about how a certain organisation would do things to make it easy for everyone, but without being truthful in the assessment and without considering the implications for students. During the interview, Suzy mentioned how she felt about the system. Although she believed that school-based assessment was good for students, this was not necessarily so for teachers. For instance, school-based assessment brought with it, additional work for teachers.

*Kita kena tengok satu-satu, itu yang susah tu. Kalau seorang cikgu tu pegang 2, 3 kelas ... Ah dia letih dari segi ini je lah.  
[We have to observe one by one, that's what makes it difficult. If a teacher holds 2, 3 classes ... Ah, it's tiring in this sense.]*

Suzy, Interview, L817-L818, L820

According to Linda, school-based assessment demanded a large amount of evidence from teachers (Linda, Interview, L266-275). Suzy explained that when it came to documentation of the assessment, she would do it in a rush as it was given to her to be completed within a short period of time. She felt burdened with this work, thus developing negative feelings towards the school-based assessment system in general. Moreover, the work related to assessment was always done in an ad-hoc manner, with teachers always rushed in doing the assessment which forced them to do what needed to be done without giving proper or thorough consideration to students' performance.

*Kita macam menipu? Kita macam menipu je la sebab kita kalut-kalutkan.  
[It's like we're cheating. We're like cheating because we are in a rush.]*

Suzy, Interview, L275

Suzy argued that this defeated the purpose of having the school-based assessment system in the first place as teachers and stakeholders could not cope with the pace. Furthermore, teachers were expected to have 100% of their students passing the level. What made this more difficult was when a certain stakeholder encouraged teachers to

assess students by giving them a pass as that stakeholder was also trying to avoid being questioned by higher-level stakeholders.

*Banyak-banyak kali nak buat, buat apa? Guna tu (peperiksaan) sajalah. Benda nak 100% lulus. Habis tu kenapa nak tubuhka nkalau orang sana pun cakap, "Ala, luluskan sajalah". Buat apa kalau macam tu? Untuk apa sebenarnya?*

*[Why do it so many times? Just use it (the examination). You want it 100% passed. Then what's the purpose of establishing this (system) if the stakeholder would say "Just pass the students". What's the purpose of that? What for?]*

Suzy, Interview, L935-936

Moreover, Suzy was not the only teacher who experienced this situation. Nick experienced a similar situation with a particular stakeholder. According to Nick, a school needed to achieve a certain key performance indicator (KPI) percentage in their second LINUS assessment, with this percentage depending on the result of the first LINUS assessment (Luyee et al., 2015). If students did not pass, the school would not achieve its KPI percentage. Consequently, teachers would have to prepare a report on why students were not performing, with the school inspector then visiting to check on students who were not passing and/or the school. Usually, one or two students would not pass the assessment. However, teachers were often told to make them pass to avoid questions from a higher-level authority.

*So cikgu tak boleh buat apa-apa. PPD datang, bagi lepas la. Dua orang je pun, macam tu.*

*[So teachers can't do anything. The DEO [District Education Office] comes, asks to pass the students. It's just two students, like that.]*

Nick, Interview, L546-L547

Nick also stated that when it came to assessing students' pronunciation for LINUS (Luyee et al., 2015), teachers were not supposed to pronounce the word. Instead, the pronunciation must come from students themselves without any assistance.

*Macam, for LINUS, kita tidak boleh bagi dia orang input macam, 'Ini Universiti', dan sebut. Tak boleh. Diorang kena sebut sendiri. So, bila diorang yang atas ni datang, diorang bagi macamtujer, 'universiti', sebut 'Ha, tu boleh sebut'. Kira lepas la.*

*[For example, in LINUS, we cannot give them input. "This is 'university', pronounce it". We cannot. They have to pronounce it themselves. So when these people came, they just passed it like that, "'University', say it." "Ha, you can say it". So passed.]*

Nick, Interview, L620-625

*Ah, dia (pelajar) bukan sebut dari dia (pelajar), dia (pelajar) just tiru apa yang orang lain cakap.*

*[Ah, the pronunciation did not actually come from the student; the student just copied what the people said.]*

Nick, Interview, L627

#### **D. Unclear Meaning**

Linda's assumption was that the school-based assessment system was not standardised. She shared her previous experience when she intended to give her student a Band 6 as she thought that the student deserved to have the band, based on his performance and effort in class. However, when she asked her colleague, her colleague gave the student a Band 4. As a result of this difference and this experience, Linda felt that the school-based assessment system was not standardised. When the researcher probed further to gain an understanding of the situation, Linda expressed the opinion that the Performance Standard was written using vague terms, thus causing different teachers to have different interpretations of which band should be given to students.

*... it says there 'murid yang mithali [an exemplary student]' so what is that? ... what definition do I have and what definition does the person who set that word have?*

Linda, Interview, L288-L290

Linda admitted that she still did not fully understand the school-based assessment requirements, but she always asked many questions when she went to meetings. Due

to her incomplete understanding, she felt frustrated as she did not like giving low marks to her students, preferring to give them the marks that she knew they deserved.

#### **E. Lack of Exercise Bank for Lower-level Students**

Linda mentioned that she liked to browse through question banks provided by local newspapers. However, she became frustrated as she could not find worksheets for lower-level primary students, and specifically for those in Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3.

*It's very good, it's very very good, you can bina [build] your own soalan lembaran kerja [worksheets] but no Tahun [Year] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.*

Linda, Interview, L555-L556

Linda believed that using worksheets was good as an additional exercise, but it would be even better if a few worksheets could be provided for lower-level primary students. She believed that having worksheets would save her time that she was spending searching for questions on the internet. Linda felt it was quite unfair that lower-level primary students were not being given equal priority as these exercise banks should also be provided to these students and their teachers.

#### **4.5 Summary**

Overall, the participant teachers understood that the previous system had a very examination-oriented base and that the current assessment system gave them more flexibility in assessing their students. In addition, teachers understood that the current assessment system allowed them to assess their students on aspects beyond their academic performance. These aspects included their communication skills; interaction with teachers and other students; cooperation (Ashley, interview, L57-L63); effort (Linda, interview, L277-L283; Suzy, interview, L318-L321); and attitudes (Suzy, interview, L279-L280). This was in line with the objective of the Ministry of

Education Malaysia of having a holistic assessment that assessed students' overall performance to produce world-class human capital. The study's findings revealed that various methods were used by teachers to assess their students' early literacy. The findings showed that the most-used methods were observation and questioning, although the latter was the method least mentioned by teachers in the interviews. Other practices used by teachers to assess their students' early literacy included worksheets and exercises, working in pairs and group work, quizzes and educational games. Furthermore, most teachers preferred to give verbal feedback rather than written feedback when it came to informing students that they had made a mistake during a lesson. Various issues were identified in the findings. Some of the challenges highlighted by the participant teachers were the preparation needed to teach and assess their students, time constraints, the need to revert to assessment's purposes and the lack of availability of exercises for lower-level primary school students from an exercise bank.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the purpose of carrying out this study was to examine the methods of assessment used in the ESL (English as a second language) classroom at two selected national primary schools, and to identify teachers' perceptions of the use of school-based assessment in relation to the practice of early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom. Thus, this chapter presents the summary of the study, the discussion and conclusion, the implications and the study's recommendations.

#### 5.2 Summary of the Study

After more than two decades of assessing students' performance through examination-oriented assessments, the Ministry of Education Malaysia decided to use a more holistic approach to assess students' performance in schools. Thus, the implementation of school-based assessment began in 2011 for primary schools, and 2012 for secondary schools. Based on the literature review conducted for this research, most school-based assessment related studies were conducted within the Malaysian context to investigate teachers' readiness to implement school-based assessment, and their understanding of this form of assessment. Moreover, most studies were conducted in secondary school settings using quantitative methods. Therefore, the current study used qualitative methods to contribute to the practices and issues of early literacy assessment in classrooms within the school-based assessment context in primary school settings. This research was guided by the following research questions: (1) How has early

literacy been practised by teachers in ESL classrooms at primary school level and (2) what are the challenges faced by teachers when administering early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms.

Several qualitative methods were used to answer the research questions, comprising: interviewing teachers, observing their lessons, acquiring relevant documentation and gaining insights through teachers' reflections. Although the researcher had specific ideas about the target participants for this study, upon reaching the schools, she realised she had very little control over who the participants would be as this depended on several factors including each headmaster's approval, teachers' availability and schedule, and each school's activities. All data were compiled and organised in a specific manner. The interview transcriptions were transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, both interviews and classroom observations were audio and video recorded with participants' permission. The researcher viewed the recorded classroom observations multiple times to identify the practices and issues in assessing students' literacy. The data collected were thematically analysed and triangulated to corroborate the study's findings which were further discussed and organised to answer the research questions.

### **5.3 Discussion and Conclusion**

This section provides the discussion and conclusion of the study's findings under the following subtopics.

#### **5.3.1 Research Question 1**

One of the research objectives was to examine the methods of assessment in ESL classrooms at two selected national primary schools. Therefore, this subsection presents the discussion and conclusion for Research Question 1:



1. What are the methods of early literacy assessment practised by teachers in ESL classrooms at primary school level?

The major findings from this study revealed that the commonly used methods to assess students' early literacy included observation, questioning, tasks and feedback.

#### **A. Observation**

Many different tools and strategies can be used by a teacher to assess a student's performance in the classroom. Observation was found by this study to be one of the methods that teachers used most often. Although observation is less structured compared to other assessment practices, it is usually carried out with a purpose and can be done in the classroom either informally or in a planned manner (McKay, 2006).

Although not all teachers explicitly mentioned the use of observation in their classroom, mention of observation was predominant in the interviews. The findings revealed an emphasis on the use of observation to assess students' behaviour and oral pronunciation during classroom assessment. Ashley, John, Lucy and Suzy were the four teachers who emphasised that observation was not carried out solely to assess students' oral pronunciation, but also to assess their behaviour.

The two relevant aspects that teachers observed among their students were non-verbal behaviour and vocal cues. The study findings revealed that teachers assessed students' behaviour and attitudes in the classroom as well as their academic performance. Suzy asserted that she not only observed her students' pronunciation, but also their behaviour and attitudes in class. If the student was proficient but demonstrated a lack of manners, she would provide him/her with an average mark. Meanwhile, Ashley believed that observing her students provided her with a better understanding of them to enable her to provide a better assessment. As McMillan

(2001) affirmed, non-verbal cues are one aspect of observation that provides rich, stable and consistent information on students' affective states. John strongly believed in observation, believing that it was an important skill that every teacher should have. He claimed that findings from observation would provide the most significant clues as to whether a student was progressing well in the topic being taught, or whether they were struggling with that topic. The most apparent outcomes were that, not only was he able to identify the differences between a student with good proficiency and one with poor proficiency, but also that he could use these examples during classroom observation to support his belief. Evidently, his belief was based on a solid foundation. As stated earlier, students who were generally loud and spoke fluently were often labelled as generally proficient and confident students, while students who lacked confidence tended to speak quietly with limited variations and many pauses (McMillan, 2001). Loudness was associated with competence, while quietness was associated with uncertainty and being anxious (McMillan, 2001).

In addition to using observation to assess students' behaviour in class, Lucy and John used observation to assess their oral pronunciation. John indicated multiple instances where he could explicitly explain how he used observation to "see" his students' pronunciation in class. John incorporated this specific strategy when he gave his students a verbal task, asking them to read aloud, to read a paragraph aloud or to repeat after him. As asserted by Brown and Abeywickrama (2010), one of the objectives of utilising observation in the classroom is to assess students without them realising, so their natural linguistic performance can be maximised. The classroom observation revealed that the type of speaking used in John's classroom was up to the intensive level, with the pronunciation of short stretches of oral language to demonstrate certain competence, with little interaction with the teacher. The

observation by these participant teachers corroborated the findings of a study conducted by Garrison and Ehringhaus (2009) in which observation was one of the strategies used to see if students required assistance and to assist teachers by informing their instructional planning.

In summary, it can be concluded that the participant teachers used observation mainly for two purposes: (1) to assess students' oral pronunciation and (2) to assess students' behaviour. This led to the conclusion that these teachers assessed their students holistically by not only considering their academic performance, but also by taking into consideration their affective state in the classroom. This indicated teachers' understanding of the purpose of school-based assessment which was to provide holistic assessment in Malaysia's efforts to produce world-class citizens. This was in line with the nation's objective when it implemented school-based assessment that holistic assessment not only assessed students' cognitive skills, but also their affective and psychomotor skills, and specifically the former. The findings also revealed that observation was not a strategy to be used on its own, but that it should mostly be incorporated with other strategies such as questioning, tasks and feedback. Observation is, after all, a central tool for assessment in the classroom (McKay, 2006). It is indeed one of the many strategies that teachers can use to assess students, as stated by Brown and Abeywickrama (2010); Malaysian Examination Board, (2011); and McKay (2006).

## **B. Questioning**

Although questioning was mentioned by only a few teachers in the interviews, it was clearly being used as found in the classroom observation. Questions were incorporated within the classroom context when the teacher talked to encourage and monitor

students' understanding of the content being taught during the lesson (McMillan, 2001). The findings revealed that the teachers used all five purposes of questioning in the classroom, as defined by McMillan (2001).

The first reason, which was encouraging students to become involved in the lesson, was particularly evident in the classroom observation of Jane's and Linda's classes. Jane and Linda both demonstrated instances in which they would ask students questions collectively or individually to encourage them to continue their participation in the activity. When students started to slowly lose their focus, Jane used questioning to get their attention and to control their behaviour. All teachers who participated in the classroom observation used questioning as a method to promote students' learning while, at the same time, assessing their progress throughout the lesson.

The interviews revealed that only two of the seven interviewed teachers used questioning to assess their students. However, the classroom observation revealed that teachers used a large amount of questioning throughout the lesson, with a focus on knowledge target questioning as most questions began with 'what', 'who', 'where' and 'when'. It is understandable that reasoning target questions were rarely observed in this study as knowledge target questions were more suitable for lower-level primary students compared to reasoning target questions. It was also possible that questioning was not mentioned as one of the strategies used to assess students' learning in the classroom as it was commonly used by teachers and, unlike observation, it was not explicitly stated by the Malaysian Examination Board (2011) as its own method. As with observation, the use of questioning allowed teachers to obtain information on students' progress without having the interference of the formality of assessment as used in paper-and-pencil assessment (Airasian, 2000). Teachers were still able to assess students' progress in the classroom through questioning.

McMillan (2001) suggested that teachers should allow students to have sufficient 'wait' time to encourage them to produce enhanced quality and quantity in their response. However, instances were observed in the classroom when Jane did not allow enough time for students to respond and ended up answering the question herself. At the time of the observation, Jane was teaching Year 1 students. It is possible that she answered her own question to ensure the achievement of the lesson's learning objectives and that her students had enough time to do the exercise within the lesson's time frame. Time constraints, after all, are no stranger to teachers.

This finding supported what Nick believed to be a drawback for students when teachers used questioning as their strategy. Although Nick knew that teachers must give sufficient time to students in questioning, it was unclear if he was actually aware of the ways in which teachers could utilise questioning in a positive manner as a method that could improve students' literacy and thus, indirectly, enhance their learning. It is possible that Nick's belief was formed based on his personal experience.

Asking questions during the giving of instructions provides teachers with accurate information on students' prior knowledge and their potential (McMillan, 2001). The participant teachers also seemed to probe beyond the initial response when students seemed unable to answer even after being given sufficient time to respond. For instance, during the researcher's classroom observation with John, a student came to ask him about a question that she was not sure about. Instead of giving the student the exact answer, John replied to her query with a question that would guide her to the right answer. This situation reflected the responsive elements of formative assessment in the classroom. John used the evidence elicited from the student (the question asked by the student) to inform him of his student's level of understanding. With that information, he gave the student the opportunity to explore her understanding, to use

her understanding and to think based on the feedback given, thereby empowering this student in her learning. This finding was supported by Cauley and McMillan (2010) who found that when teachers attribute students' success and mastery to moderate effort by the student, this is highly effective in influencing students into thinking that they are actually capable of learning.

The questioning strategy was also incorporated with other strategies listed under this subtopic. When a teacher asked students a question in the classroom, it was expected that students would answer the question and the teacher would provide feedback on the answer given by students. From the classroom observation conducted, Linda's response was more apparent compared to those of the other teachers. For instance, she would give appropriate responses such as a nod or a clear 'Yes' to students before proceeding to the next question or continuing with her explanation. If students seemed unable to answer the question given, Linda would probe further by asking a similar question but from a different perspective. Meanwhile, Jane and John used the word 'Okay' quite a lot in their lessons and sometimes would simply continue with the lesson or move to the next question.

In summary, it can be concluded that the participant teachers practised some of the good characteristics of effective questioning, as suggested by Wareing (2010). They asked clear and succinct questions focusing on knowledge target questions suited to students' year level (McMillan, 2001). These teachers also seemed to address questions posed to the whole class, thereby encouraging class participation. They also practised the giving of appropriate responses. One of the most obvious characteristics, which one teacher did not follow, was giving students enough time to think before answering a question. However, this did not mean that the teacher or the teaching were bad for not adhering to this characteristic. The inability to apply this practice could be

due to several contributing factors such as insufficient time especially for younger students (Year 1). Another reason could be the large number of young students which would be difficult for the teacher to control if, for example, the one teacher had 40 students. Questioning was also integrated with other strategies, such as observation, tasks and feedback.

### **C. Tasks**

Traditionally, tasks are referred to as teaching activities with intentional pedagogical purposes (Purpura, 2004). The study revealed that teachers used a variety of tasks to assess students, as suggested by Butler and McMunn (2006). These tasks included spelling tests, exercises from activity books, worksheets, quizzes and educational games. The tasks used by teachers were mainly to assess students' comprehension, to capture their interest and attention, and for their memorisation.

In this study, teachers used exercises from activity books and worksheets to assess students' understanding of lessons. Marking students' work also allowed teachers to identify which students still required further enhancement in their learning and which students had already reached the learning goals. Ashley used this method to assess her students' understanding. Not only did she assess the learning outcome, but she also monitored her students' progress towards reaching the outcome, such as their teamwork and interpersonal skills. Nick and Linda also used worksheets to assess their students' capability in literacy. However, it was interesting to note Jane's experience of relying on only one strategy to assess her students. As previously revealed, Jane learnt that using only exercises to assess students' progress in literacy had backfired when she discovered that one student, assessed positively based on

exercises, did not perform well during the examination. As McKay (2006) affirmed, it is imperative that teachers apply multiple strategies when assessing students' progress.

Different types of tasks were used to engage students and to indirectly assess them. Taking into consideration their students' levels of interest, these teachers used different types of tasks to obtain their students' interest and to maintain their attention. For instance, Linda used a variety of entertaining educational games such as puzzles and singing activities in her class. She also welcomed her students coming to the front of the classroom and using the whiteboard as one means to encourage class participation. Meanwhile, Suzy found that her students really enjoyed playing 'VLE Frog', an educational game provided by the Ministry. She also utilised that platform to assess students by recording the marks they obtained. As affirmed by McKay (2006), these tasks may be simple or complex and can be supported by teachers or independent for students on their own, without their teacher (p. 168).

Tasks were used by teachers to encourage students to memorise certain things. Lucy shared her experience of using spelling tests to see if her students remembered the words they had learnt the previous week. Quizzes were applied by teachers as one of the strategies for assessing students' pronunciation. For John, using quizzes allowed him to not only assess his students' pronunciation, but also to assess the effectiveness of his own teaching. This teacher thus used the assessment to reflect on his own teaching. Ultimately, this provided evidence of formative assessment.

In summary, these tasks encouraged students' success. They encouraged students to become involved in classroom activities and assessment. Tasks provided by these teachers also promoted students' metacognition, as suggested by Butler and McMunn (2006) and McKay (2006). This finding is portrayed in the use of exercise books, worksheets and educational games. Teachers also considered students' interests



when applying this strategy to assess students' early literacy. Interesting tasks, such as educational games and singing activities, boosted students' interest and motivation during lessons (McKay, 2006). As affirmed by McKay (2006), when carrying out tasks, students are required to use the targeted language to achieve learning goals. Vygotsky (1978), in his sociocultural theory, also emphasised providing necessary and relevant tasks to incite students' intrinsic needs. The varied types of tasks used in the current study were mostly aligned with the list provided by the Malaysian Examination Board (2011), although teachers were given the autonomy to assess students in ways that seemed appropriate for their students. This also supported the summary by French (2013) that children acquire language and literacy during their playtime and everyday experiences. Students were able to acquire language and literacy from the variety of tasks provided by teachers during lessons. Although Jane learnt that she must not rely solely on one method to assess her students, other teachers incorporated different strategies such as observation, questioning and feedback when assessing their students. These tasks gave students the opportunity to reaffirm what they had learned and provided additional support in their learning. Using tasks as one of the assessment strategies allowed teachers to identify students' progress in learning, thus enabling teachers to guide their students to achieve the learning objectives. Again, by using this strategy, teachers not only assessed students' academic performance, but also their affective aspects including teamwork, interpersonal skills and communication. In line with the holistic assessment approach adopted by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, teachers now not only assessed the outcome of students' learning, but also their progress towards achieving learning outcomes.

#### **D. Feedback**

Feedback is one of the main characteristics of formative assessment, as stated by Cauley and McMillan (2010), Chappuis (2009) and Harlen and James (1997). For effective teaching and learning to take place, it is important to have the right kind of feedback received and given between teachers and students (McMillan, 2001). The current study revealed that teachers practised the use of feedback to inform students about their progress and the corrective actions needed, and to inform themselves as teachers about the instructional strategies they were using. In inform students of their progress, teachers used both written and verbal feedback. In written feedback, teachers provided specific and precise feedback to students. For instance, when Suzy marked her students' work in an exercise, she would cross out the wrong answer and write the correct word above the wrong one. In that sense, her feedback was specific.

The teachers also practised the delivery of positive feedback before informing students of the corrective actions they could take. Nick was a firm believer that teachers must always begin by delivering positive feedback before informing students of what they needed to improve. His belief was supported by what had been affirmed by both Kuang (2013) and McMillan (2001) that teachers must be mindful of how they deliver feedback. French (2013) also affirmed that, in building the development of bilingual children's literacy, it was imperative that teachers were aware, sensitive, respectful and supportive of the diversity that existed in children's families, culture and linguistic background. By taking these factors into consideration, teachers would create safe learning conditions, in an environment that was neither judgmental nor threatening (Rolfe & McPherson, 1995).

The teachers also practised the delivery of feedback directly to individuals, in pairs or in groups, depending on the tasks or assignment provided. When John delivered feedback to his students, he used the questioning technique to help students to understand where they were in their learning. He used the same technique as the means of encouraging students to think of the next logical step to move forward in their learning. John's integration of questioning with feedback supported Wareing's (2010) suggestions on using effective questioning and feedback to improve students' learning progress. By doing so, the teacher is encouraging students to be active learners by allowing them to understand their strengths and weaknesses (Harlen & James, 1997).

In conclusion, feedback was the only strategy used to assess students' early literacy that had all the characteristics of formative assessment; that is, it was interactive, responsive, flexible and constructive. Feedback in formative assessment has been widely discussed in articles written by Cauley and McMillan (2010), March (2007), Wiliam (2011), Garrison and Ehringhaus (2009), Chappuis (2009), Wareing (2010) and Harlen and James (1997). Feedback given by students informed teachers of their current progress during learning, with teachers using that information to modify their instructions to enable students to achieve the learning target. For instance, John's approach of responding to a student's query with another question encouraged the student to be introspective in their learning, thus not being dependent on the teacher for the answer. Being responsive is an important characteristic to have in teaching and learning. Students need to be responsive towards the lesson, and teachers may use other strategies such as observation, questioning and task completion to obtain information on students' progress. The information obtained from these strategies is then used to inform the teacher about possible changes to be made in instruction should

the need arise. This occurs when teachers are being responsive to students, using feedback from students to improve the teaching and learning process. This also fulfils the criteria of feedback being constructive. Feedback is also flexible in the sense that it can be carried out at any time during the lesson. All these characteristics of feedback were evident throughout the data collection and findings of the current study. In line with Wiliam (2006), the information obtained from assessment was used for the betterment of both students and teachers. The evidence collected from this study supports the affirmation of Cauley and McMillan (2010) and Chappuis (2009) of the need and importance of feedback in formative assessment.

### **5.3.2 Research Question 2**

The second objective of the research was to identify teachers' perceptions of the use of school-based assessment in relation to the practice of early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms. Thus, this section aims to discuss and provide conclusions for the following research question:

2. What are teachers' perceptions of using school-based assessment in early literacy assessment in ESL classrooms?

The findings revealed that the challenges faced by teachers when administering early literacy assessment in the ESL classroom included their lack of knowledge about, and lack of preparation for, teaching and assessment, time constraints, conflicting purposes of assessment and unclear meanings within the Performance Standard provided.

## **A. Teachers' Lack of Knowledge and Lack of Preparation**

Among the many challenges that teachers face when administering early literacy assessment in the classroom is their lack of knowledge and lack of preparation for teaching and, accordingly, for assessing students. One of the many contributing reasons was the background of teachers who had studied in fields such as Mathematics or Science and then had to teach a different subject, specifically English in the current research. For instance, Lucy, whose major was in Mathematics, had to teach English from when she was posted to her current school. Despite not having sufficient knowledge of the subject being taught, the pedagogy to teach the subject and insufficient training to teach English, Lucy made an effort to learn on her own and sought assistance from her colleagues before teaching the subject to students. Fortunately, Lucy understood the importance of teaching correctly to students. Lucy's case was similar to that of Suzy who had to teach English despite majoring in Mathematics due to the limited number of teachers at her school who taught English. Although facing similar issues to Lucy, Suzy would sometimes apply teaching strategies from Mathematics to teaching English. The result was that teachers used pedagogical knowledge from other subjects to teach English. The participant teachers admittedly had neither the correct nor sufficient subject knowledge to teach students correctly although they made an effort to learn. These teachers also admitted that they were initially not confident to teach and speak the English language at the beginning. Suzy admitted that, when she first had to teach English in her school, she realised her students could speak better English than she could. That realisation contributed to her insecurities in teaching the subject, particularly early literacy as it involved certain aspects that required the teacher to be truly knowledgeable about he/she was teaching, such as phonemes. Through time and with support from their colleagues, these teachers

managed to overcome their insecurities and were able to speak English confidently.

Meanwhile, John and Nick, as newly graduated teachers, felt that their teaching and assessment of students still had room for improvement. John, as a new graduate, realised that the theories he had been taught when studying teacher education differed from actual practice in his school. Although they were both adapting to the realities of the teaching world, John and Nick found that one of the major benefits of being a new graduate was being exposed to the concept and implementation of school-based assessment at the beginning of their teaching career. This is not to say that teachers with years of experience were at a disadvantage, as the current study revealed that they too had already been practising formative assessment in their classroom, only without the formal documentation.

From a larger perspective, two groups were identified among the participants on this issue: one group comprised teachers teaching English even though their subject background was different, whereas the second comprised those with a TESL background who were teaching English. The first difference was that the latter group had years of experience, whereas the former group did not. The second difference was that the first group had issues mostly about pedagogical and subject-content knowledge due to their different subject backgrounds, whereas the second group was equipped with the right pedagogical and subject-content knowledge as they were themselves TESL graduates. However, the second group felt that they could improve their assessment of early literacy. Therefore, to identify and address this challenge, it can be concluded that teachers faced this issue due to their different subject backgrounds which not only affected their confidence in communicating in English and teaching English as a subject, but also their pedagogical and assessment approach in the classroom. This challenge was found to still persist even eight years after school-

based assessment implementation. Majid (2011) discovered that teachers' knowledge and skills in implementing school-based assessment were still quite poor despite the guidelines and objectives provided by the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

The participant teachers were indeed provided with books, guidelines and training by the Ministry to equip them with the knowledge needed to implement the assessment. The findings also revealed that teachers actually understood the differences between formative and summative assessment, and they understood the purpose of implementing school-based assessment. However, what caused the confusion was the vague terms in the Performance Standard provided by the Ministry. According to Linda, different teachers had different interpretations of the terms used in the description. In fact, she shared her previous experience of where she felt the student was performing well, but her colleague thought the opposite. These differences of opinion caused conflict between teachers when giving marks to students. The experienced teachers felt they needed a clearer definition of the terms, whereas the new graduate teachers felt they needed more experience to solidify their knowledge on assessing students' early literacy. Nevertheless, despite facing these challenges, the participant teachers were positive and took proactive actions in seeking ways to improve their knowledge so they could teach students using the correct knowledge and skills.

## **B. Time Constraints**

The study revealed that one of the challenges that these teachers were facing in administering the assessment in the classroom was time constraints. This finding corroborated with findings from Majid (2011), Omar and Sinnasamy (2009), Othman et al. (2013) and Abdullah et al. (2015) that teachers did not have sufficient time to

carry out the assessment. Several factors contributed to why teachers had insufficient time to execute the assessment properly. These factors included their excessive and time-consuming workload. One of the teachers, Linda, claimed that school-based assessment required a large amount of evidence used only for assessment. A teacher's job today was no longer simply teaching, but involved managing other administrative tasks and taking up responsibilities for roles or positions as appointed at their school.

This finding was supported by Othman et al. (2013) in their study which explicitly mentioned that teachers did not have adequate time to implement school-based assessment within the primary school setting. Similar to their study's findings, the current study found that teachers did not have enough time to manage the documentation aspect of the assessment, the filing, etc. The difference between these studies was that these authors' study did not mention the impact of this issue on students and teachers as has been done in the current study.

As stated earlier, Suzy commented that she and her colleagues were given a very short time in which to complete the documents required for school-based assessment. She thus felt forced to furnish these documents with little thought to students' actual performance and the mark they deserved, instead giving an average mark to all students. Teachers also avoided giving too high or too low a mark to students to avoid higher-level stakeholders coming to their school to query and conduct further check-ups on the said students' performance. Following these check-ups, teachers would be required to complete and submit a report to the higher-level stakeholder which meant yet another additional part of their workload.

The inadequate time that teachers were given to complete the administrative aspect of school-based assessment certainly affected their records of students' performance. In cases like those mentioned above, this would be reflected as



inaccuracy in students' actual marks and performance. The impact of this situation continued beyond the paperwork. In the classroom, it would affect both the student and the teacher when the student progressed to the next level. Due to the earlier misinformation, the student would be placed in a level that did not truly reflect his/her own progress. The wrong placement would affect the student's learning as he/she would need to catch up to avoid being left behind. The wrong placement would also affect the teacher who would come to realise that certain students were not placed according to their actual progress. With this realisation, the teacher would face unnecessary stress and an additional burden in identifying the student's actual level instead of helping him/her to progress from their supposed level, and would need to accommodate the small number of wrongly placed students to ensure they were able to catch up with their peers. To ensure that teachers were able to assess students within the allocated period of time, some teachers opted to assess students in groups. Nick, Ashley, Suzy and Jane asserted that they found assessing students individually to be time consuming; hence, they chose to use group assessment. This was also evident in Omar and Sinnasamy's (2009) study which found that teachers faced time constraints due to having to handle a large number of students in the classroom.

Samsudin et al. (2014) claimed that teachers did not have enough time to implement activities in the classroom. As mentioned above, several teachers opted for group assessment instead of individual assessment to make the assessment process easier, faster and more efficient for them as teachers. It is without doubt that teachers could save much time if they opted to assess students in groups rather than individually. It is also worth noting that during one of the observations conducted, Jane, when using questioning, answered her own question during her lesson. Regardless of the year level of the students being taught (whether Year 1, Year 2 or

Year 3), teachers were given the same amount of time to teach the subject. It was also difficult for a teacher to control and manage a classroom on their own when they had 40 students. If Jane actually waited for students to answer her question, the possibility was that she would not have completed her lesson within the scheduled time frame. Some teachers opted for simpler tasks and assignments for their students for the same reason (Abdullah et al., 2015).

In summary, it can be concluded that one of the challenges that teachers continued to face when administering assessment in the classroom was time constraints. This was due to the excessive and time-consuming workload as concurred by Majid (2011), Omar and Sinnasamy (2009), Othman et al. (2013), Abdullah et al. (2015) and Samsudin et al. (2014). This issue directly affected both teachers and students. Despite realising that teachers faced this challenge, Samsudin et al. (2014) urged teachers to be more skilled in managing their time.

### **C. Conflicting Purposes of Assessment Implementation**

The conflicting purposes of the school-based assessment implementation was another challenge faced by teachers. The current study revealed that teachers understood the concept and purposes of implementing school-based assessment. Despite, in some cases, their lack of subject-content knowledge, teachers still made the effort to learn and improve themselves to teach students correctly. Upon further investigation, several issues were causing teachers to feel that the Malaysian education system was still not moving away from the grading mindset.

Teachers and schools were pressured by parents to conduct examinations so parents could monitor their children's progress using the grades they obtained. One teacher, Ashley, indicated that, despite no longer relying much on tests, discussions

and sharing between teachers from different schools were occurring to help in producing examination papers for students. The reason was that teachers and schools felt pressured by parents who felt that examinations was only way they could monitor their children's performance at school. Undeniably, these children's parents were products of the former examination-oriented system. Thus, it was understandable that they were unfamiliar with the new assessment approach introduced by the Ministry with the intention of assessing students holistically to produce world-class citizens. Teachers and schools understood that this was a new concept for everyone involved, including parents. Actions such as briefings at the beginning of each year were conducted to inform parents about how their children would be assessed under school-based assessment. Yet, teachers and schools were still pressured to produce examination papers. This pressure caused the participant teachers to feel as if their efforts to achieve the purposes of school-based assessment were all for nothing.

In addition, the lack of commitment from higher-level stakeholders contributed to this issue. As mentioned earlier, teachers avoided giving marks to students that were too high or too low to avoid further queries from higher-level stakeholders which would mean having to produce reports and, thus, additional workload for teachers. Some teachers even reported that when these stakeholders would come to their schools, sometimes they would ask teachers to 'turn a blind eye' and pass the student, as they too wanted to avoid being questioned by an even higher-level authority. When higher-level stakeholders suggested such actions, teachers felt conflicted between assessing students correctly or taking the easy way out. More often than not, teachers chose the latter as both sides wanted to avoid additional work on top of their existing workload. The amount of their workload gave teachers less time to properly consider students' actual performance when carrying out assessment in the classroom.

In summary, the participant teachers felt that everything they were doing defeated the purpose of having school-based assessment implemented in the first place. The purposes of the assessment were to inform students of their progress and, for teachers, to identify and understand students' current positions in learning to improve the teaching and learning process. It was crucial in hindsight to remember the four purposes for school-based assessment: (1) to enhance meaningful assessment; (2) to reduce the over-reliance on grades and scores; (3) to empower schools and teachers to carry out quality assessment; and (4) to ensure Malaysian students' performance was comparable to world standard (Hashim et al., 2013). If parents continued to pressure schools to allow students' progress to be measured based on examinations and if higher-level stakeholders maintained their lack of commitment, this then would defeat the purposes of school-based assessment, one of which was to reduce the over-reliance on grades and scores (Hashim et al., 2013).

#### **5.4 Implications**

This study's findings have implications for practice and for issues identified in early literacy assessment under the implementation of school-based assessment. In the review of the literature related to assessment in Chapter 2, school-based assessment, early literacy and theories related to early literacy were discussed at great length. The findings were explained in detail in Chapter 4 and were then discussed extensively in the current chapter. Several implications from the study's findings are discussed below.

The findings firstly suggested that most teachers integrated different strategies of assessment to assess students' progress in early literacy and did not rely specifically on one method of assessment. It was considered important that teachers did not depend on one type of assessment to assess students' progress and that they could assess

students' cognitive and affective aspects in line with the objectives of school-based assessment. The four strategies revealed in this study, namely, observation, questioning, tasks and feedback were the types of assessment strategies used by teachers to assess all four literacy skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing at an early stage. Hence, the assessment of students' pronunciation, comprehension in listening, writing and reading could be conducted effectively. Other than these four literacy skills, teachers also assessed students' behaviour and attitudes in the classroom by observing their interpersonal skills, teamwork and values. Teachers not only assessed the outcome of the lesson, but also *how* students reached that outcome. This combination of cognitive and affective assessment reflected teachers' understanding and efforts to assess students holistically and to produce world-class citizens in line with the school-based assessment implementation introduced by the Ministry.

Secondly, teachers' lack of knowledge to teach the subject of English showed that they needed input on the subject content, and on pedagogical and assessment knowledge. Most of the teachers participating in the study, particularly those with years of teaching experience, came from a different background to the subject they were teaching. For instance, a teacher with a Mathematics background but who was teaching English would certainly require the subject content and pedagogical knowledge suited to the subject of English. The Ministry of Education Malaysia needs to change its perception that teachers of any subject could teach subjects such as English merely because it seemed 'simple' and was 'only at primary level'. It is vital for students learning English to be exposed to the right subject content and pedagogical knowledge, such as phonemes, as these factors are heavily involved in developing students' early literacy. Students' success later in life is dependent on this exposure to literacy (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). However, this does not mean that the

Ministry cannot appoint any teachers at all of different subject backgrounds to teach English. While it is advised that the Ministry find solutions to rectify this issue, perhaps a temporary solution would be to provide subject content knowledge training to these teachers to ensure they are correctly teaching their students, until the larger issue can be solved. Related stakeholders could also improve and increase the training provided to teachers by offering assessment training courses so they could improve their practice of student assessment. The in-house training conducted by those teachers who went to the training at district or state level were found to be ineffective as the knowledge shared was most likely diluted. Some teachers also reported that they could not have their questions answered in the in-house training. Increasing the amount and level of training would also mean increased opportunities for teachers to obtain clarification and further explanation, thus increasing their efficacy in teaching and learning, and classroom assessment. Overall, this would improve students' performance and help to achieve the Ministry's vision of conducting holistic assessment under the implementation of school-based assessment.

Nevertheless, the findings also implied that the objectives of school-based assessment may not be fully realised for several reasons. Excessive workload for teachers, limited time given to carry out assessment, insufficient time for documentation purposes, vague descriptions in the guidelines provided and pressure from parents and higher-level stakeholders were among the factors that were leading to a retreat from the school-based assessment system. Undoubtedly, these reasons have direct implications for both teachers and students. All these factors listed above are more than enough to cause teachers to provide inaccurate and misleading marks on students' actual progress in learning. Even though Samsudin et al. (2014) suggested that teachers must learn how to better manage their time, the solution is not as simple

as that. Time management is a skill acquired through experience, as one learns how to prioritise the tasks at hand. To assist with this aspect, the management of schools could revise the structure of the information required by stakeholders and devise a strategic plan to efficiently acquire and complete the required information. Sufficient time must also be given to teachers with this to take into consideration the other administrative tasks and positions they currently hold at the school. Concurrently, teachers need to understand the importance of providing truthful assessment so students' futures are not jeopardised. Higher-level stakeholders must uphold the Ministry's vision and mission in seeking to produce quality students.

Consequently, parents need to be empowered with information on ways in which they could monitor their children's academic progress besides relying on marks and grades obtained from tests and examinations. Children's parents were products of the previous examination-oriented assessment system; thus, it is understandable why they lack familiarity with the new assessment approach introduced by the Ministry. The findings also suggest that it is difficult to shift parents' mindsets from the examination-oriented system to the more rounded assessment approach introduced by the Ministry. Schools have undertaken initiatives by providing briefings on school-based assessment to parents as the means to bridge the gap between parents and schools. However, based on the continuous pressure still experienced by teachers and schools, this has not been enough. If this issue is not addressed, it will further contribute to teachers feeling that their efforts are pointless in carrying out school-based assessment as it defeats the purpose of having the assessment system implemented in the first place.

In conclusion, this research implies that stakeholders, teachers and parents need to be further empowered with training and input on how each can play their role to facilitate school-based assessment more effectively. It is unfair to place the entire burden on teachers' shoulders. With the positivity that teachers bring into their schools, the opportunity still exists for school-based assessment to be polished to suit the contexts of schools and, most importantly, of students.

## **5.5 Recommendations**

A study without importance or a purpose is simply an empty study. Thus, the importance of this research is that it confirms the current good practice and points to new directions for further improvement and development (McKay, 2006). Several suggestions were identified from the findings reported in the previous section, with further discussion now attempted in this section. These recommendations are provided with the aim of improving the assessment of early literacy at multiple levels and from different perspectives.

Firstly, it is recommended that increased access to assessment training should be made available for teachers to avoid the dilution of knowledge during in-house training. Furthermore, teachers need to be exposed to various methods of assessing students' early literacy. This includes learning how to utilise these methods and gaining an understanding that these methods are used not simply to achieve the objectives of learning and assessment, and also to ensure that both teachers and students get the most they can from the practice of assessment. Teachers also need more training in how to manage assessment to suit the Malaysian classroom context by looking at the available variables, such as the number of students, the suitability of different types of assessment, the types of information and documentation required for



submission to higher-level authorities, and other factors that could contribute to improvements in assessment administration.

Secondly, parents need to be empowered with knowledge on how they can use the collected evidence and assessment provided by teachers to monitor their children's progress. School-based assessment was first implemented in 2011, thus making parents obvious products of the former assessment system which emphasised grading. As the time these parents went to school, the mindset was that a student's performance was measured by the number of marks obtained and the associated grade. The current Ministry of Education Malaysia has emphasised the complete opposite by employing holistic assessment to ensure that the students produced are quality students of world standard. Therefore, to ensure that assessment can be carried out by teachers and schools without the conflict that comes from external pressure, parents could also play their role in developing their children's education. Education, after all, begins at home. The researcher proposes that a guideline should be provided on how parents can monitor their children's progress. Another way would be to firstly encourage parents to participate in their children's learning at school. This would assist parents in further understanding how holistic assessment takes place at school and how their children are assessed. It is hoped that, in time, the Malaysian education system could reduce the over-reliance on grades and that understanding of the concept and purposes of the school-based assessment implementation would become fully fledged among parents and stakeholders.

Lastly, the researcher proposes that a comparative study should be carried out to study the differences in early literacy assessment practices in the high-performance School, locally known as *Sekolah Berprestasi Tinggi* (SBT) and the cluster school of excellence, locally known as *Sekolah Kluster Kecemerlangan* (SKK). Future

researchers could also compare the practices and challenges in these schools to those in national school, locally known as *Sekolah Kebangsaan* (SK), as studied in the current research. The findings that could be expected from this future study would help teachers and researchers to share which practices work, and to see if any differences are found in the challenges that teachers face in each type of primary school. Future researchers could consider teachers' assessment of literacy in the research. Future researchers could also include students' perspectives in their research to provide a broader angle. It is also recommended that a study on the effectiveness of the administration of school-based assessment at the school management level should be conducted to identify further challenges in teachers' administrative roles in school that may hinder the effective implementation of school-based assessment.

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