

Exploring Teachers' Conceptions of Classroom Based Assessment in Malaysian ESL Classrooms

*Meneliti Tanggapan Guru terhadap Pelaksanaan Pentaksiran Berasaskan Bilik Darjah
dalam Konteks Pengajaran ESL di Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

The shift from high-stakes examination system to the Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) in 2021 marked a significant transition in the Malaysian educational landscape, emphasizing continuous formative assessment. In the context of English language learning, CBA is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which aims to establish international standards for students' language proficiency. This study explores Malaysian ESL teachers' conceptions of CBA following education reform and examines its alignment with policy mandates. This research used qualitative approach of a case study design where the data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine Form 3 ESL teachers from four public secondary schools in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, who were selected through purposive sampling. Document analysis supplemented the interviews to triangulate findings and provide deeper insights into how teachers perceive and implement CBA in line with policy requirements. Findings show that teachers could articulate conceptions of CBA that align with policy recommendations. Teachers viewed CBA as a form of continuous assessment, a problem-solving tool, and a comprehensive evaluation method that corresponds with policy requirements. However, some teachers faced challenges due to an incomplete understanding of its objectives, particularly in relation to the holistic assessment of language skills. More concerningly, some still perceive CBA as being similar to traditional examinations. This study identifies gaps in teachers' comprehension of CBA, suggesting the need for targeted professional development and clearer instructional guidelines to ensure successful implementation. These findings contribute to discussions on educational reform, highlighting teachers' practical challenges in adapting to new assessment frameworks.

Keywords: Classroom Based Assessment, ESL Teachers, Policy Alignment, Malaysian ESL Classroom, Language Assessment

ABSTRAK

Peralihan daripada sistem peperiksaan berimpak tinggi kepada Pentaksiran Berasaskan Bilik Darjah (PBD) pada tahun 2021 menandakan perubahan besar dalam landskap pendidikan Malaysia, dengan memberi penekanan kepada pentaksiran formatif secara berterusan. Dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggeris, PBD diselaraskan dengan Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) yang menetapkan piawaian antarabangsa bagi kecekapan bahasa pelajar. Kajian ini meneroka tanggapan guru ESL terhadap PBD susulan pelaksanaan reformasi pendidikan dan menilai keselarasan pelaksanaan PBD dengan kehendak polisi. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui reka bentuk kajian kes, melibatkan sembilan orang guru ESL Tingkatan 3 dari empat buah sekolah menengah di Pulau Pinang yang dipilih secara persampelan bertujuan. Temu bual separa berstruktur dan analisis dokumen digunakan bagi mentriangulasi data dan memperoleh pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang keselarian tanggapan guru terhadap PBD dan dasar polisi. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa kebanyakan guru mempunyai pemahaman terhadap PBD yang selari dengan kehendak dasar. Guru melihat PBB sebagai pentaksiran berterusan, medium penyelesaian masalah, dan kaedah penilaian menyeluruh. Namun, masih terdapat guru yang mengalami kekeliruan, khususnya dalam memahami objektif PBD berkaitan pentaksiran holistik kemahiran bahasa. Lebih membimbangkan, ada yang masih menganggap PBD mirip peperiksaan tradisional. Kajian ini mengenal pasti jurang dalam kefahaman guru, dan mencadangkan keperluan latihan profesional yang lebih bersasar serta panduan pelaksanaan yang lebih jelas bagi menjayakan pelaksanaan PBD. Dapatan ini memberi sumbangan penting kepada wacana reformasi pendidikan, khususnya dalam memahami cabaran sebenar yang dihadapi guru dalam mengaplikasikan kerangka pentaksiran baharu di bilik darjah ESL.

Kata kunci: Pentaksiran Berasaskan Bilik Darjah, Guru ESL, Peajaran Dasar, Bilik Darjah ESL Malaysia, Pentaksiran Bahasa

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian education was highly criticised for being excessively dependant on exam-oriented culture (Chin et al., 2019) as they were many high-stakes examinations like *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR), *Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3* (PT3) and *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) were foregrounded at both primary and secondary school education. This education system was perceived to be archaic because it was claimed ineffective to equip students with skills comparable to the international standards (Radzuwan Abd Rashid et al., 2016) and students were also forced to attain high in single sitting of the examination (Rethinasamy et al., 2021). On top of that, teachers were determined as the passive implementers in the previous assessment system as their role was limited to making judgement in the students' final performance (Chin et al., 2019). The issues evoke in the previous assessment system has prompted a call for reformation in the education system.

Hence, beginning 2021, the government started a reform plan where there was a decision of abolishing the high-stakes examination in the education system. In this regard, the formative assessment was foregrounded at all levels through the implementation of Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA). This new assessment climate emphasises the concept of progressive and holistic evaluation system where students' learning progression was monitored from time to time during the classroom instruction (Kok & Abdul Aziz, 2019). In the context of English language education, the CBA is currently aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and eventually breathes an assessment climate which map students' proficiency across international standards (Barni & Salvati, 2016). This new assessment system demands the full autonomy for teachers delegate the evaluation process as their roles cover at all levels including planning, grading, preparing instrument, reporting, and documenting students' mastery level (Kok & Abd Aziz, 2019). In short, teachers need to play the active roles in the implementation process to ensure the execution of assessment reform is aligned with the policymakers' aim. Thus, Anwar Farhan Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2024) claimed that teachers' perceptions and conceptions towards the assessment reform is crucial to be discussed as what teachers perceived will eventually impact on how they unpack the policy into practice. Rahman (2014) and Qiong et al. (2024) supported that the teachers' views and understanding of the reform can greatly influence how they strategized pedagogical practices to be implemented in the classroom. The positive perceptions but limited understanding (or vice versa) of what the reform requires will have the implication on the classroom conduct (Shihiba & Embark, 2011).

As the CBA becomes a significant assessment system in the current state of Malaysian education, however, several scholars (Anwar Farhan Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023; Acar-Erdol & Yildizli, 2018; Arumugham, 2020; Zahari Suppian et al., 2020) claimed that the execution is still at the moderate level thereby contributing to the misalignment of the policy to meet the aims. Arumugham and Johari Ariffin (2021) further discussed that one of the contributing factors leading to this matter is due to the teaching fraternity was not used in the former assessment system which inadvertently posed challenges for teachers to realise the CBA in the classroom culture. What they have been encultured in is the high-stake examination system which was conducted by giving the standardized question to the students provided by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate (MES) (Amirul Fahimie Abdul Razak et al., 2024). In another aspect, Arumugham (2020) claimed that the implementation of CBA at the school level occurred in rapid transition. According to the Ministry of Education (2017), the information regarding the new assessment policy was firstly executed in October 2018 and its introduction was done in the beginning of 2019. Continuously,

the CBA was formally implemented in the beginning of 2021 which Arumugham (2020) suggested that the dissemination was not effective to ensure teachers are literate in executing the policy at the grassroots level. In this situation, teachers were caught into assimilating the new assessment concept while ensuring the implementation can be aligned with the policymakers' aims. Hence, the present study is timely to delve into teachers' conceptions of CBA in the reform climate. This discovery can potentially shed light into milestone understanding on teachers' literacy level in regard to the implementation of this new assessment reform.

Despite the discussion on CBA augurs well in the nation, the review of the previous literatures has narrowed their exploration into the teachers' literacy level (Anwar Farhan Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023; Acar-Erdol & Yildizli, 2018; Arumugham, 2020; Zahari Suppian et al., 2020) and their awareness (Mazarul Hasan Mohamad Hanapi et al., 2022; Hazuriana Hajmi & Khairul Jamaludin, 2022; Ashma Said & Wan Muna Ruzanna Wan Mohamad, 2023) in the reform implementation. Hence, Anwar Farhan Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2024) claimed that there is still a minimal exploration on the teachers' lived experiences in the new assessment reform. According to Mohamad Uri (2023), there are considerable obstacles in CEFR assessments including a lack of understanding, problems with assessment design, and increased workload. This necessitates the present study to fill in the knowledge gap by exploring the lived experiences of teachers in regard to the conceptions of CBA. Additionally, the aforementioned literature employed the quantitative approach in investigating the teachers' readiness and literacy level in the implementation of CBA. Thus, this also exhibits a potential gap in the methods as the present study employed the qualitative approach by delving into a detailed exploration on the teachers' conceptions of assessment reform in the ESL classroom. Hence, the present study intends to explore the teachers' conceptions of CBA and how their perceptions adhere with the policy mandates. This exploration can better shed light into the teachers' awareness in the assessment reform experience.

Hence, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the teachers' conceptions of CBA in the context of Malaysian ESL classrooms?
- 2) How do teachers' conceptions of CBA align with the policy requirements?

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE CLASSROOM BASED ASSESSMENT

Malaysia is moving towards a more comprehensive and progressive evaluation approach by implementing Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA). Specifically, the principles of School Assessment are incorporated into CBA by assessing students' mastery levels in each subject. Secondary school education's Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP) includes the Performance Standards that outline these mastery levels. In this context, teachers in English Language Education use the SBELC as their primary guide to determine students' mastery levels. CBA involves systematically collecting and analysing data, which reflects on the teaching and learning process, and drawing consistent conclusions to improve student learning and instructional practices. The introduction of CBA is designed to shift from the previous exam-focused system. As a result, instead of ranking and categorising students based on their performance, CBA aims to provide teachers and stakeholders with actionable insights for interventions that support students' cognitive growth (Anwar Farhan Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2024). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (2019) has provided several objectives for implementing CBA in schools, such as:

- i. Assessing the prior knowledge of students.
- ii. Monitoring their academic progress.
- iii. Determining individual strengths and areas for improvement.
- iv. Examining the effectiveness of teaching methods.
- v. Refining current teaching and learning strategies.
- vi. Implementing targeted follow-up plans based on assessment results.

In this sense, teachers need to play the crucial roles in the implementation of CBA as they were granted the full autonomy to execute the policy at the grassroot level. This autonomy transcends beyond determining the learning objectives based on the learning objectives, designing the assessment instrument, executing the evaluation, reporting the students' mastery levels and carrying out the intervention procedures for the students (Ministry of Education, 2019). In the context of Malaysian education, the reporting of students' language progression in CBA was done twice a year which mainly occurs at the beginning and end of the academic year.

Under the previous centralized assessment system under the KBSM curriculum, students' mastery levels were largely determined by high-stakes examinations like the PT3. These exams, administered by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate (MES), followed a rigid, standardized process where MES was responsible for preparing the examination papers, conducting the exams according to strict schedules, and overseeing their evaluation. This method placed immense pressure on students, as their performance was measured by their ability to achieve high scores in a single, high-stakes sitting (Farhana Yasmin et al., 2023). However, this approach has been criticized for its inability to capture the full scope of students' learning and understanding. It often led to rote memorization rather than fostering critical thinking and creativity. In contrast, a more holistic and flexible assessment model is seen as better suited to unlocking students' true learning potential. This approach allows students to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, across different contexts, rather than being confined to a single exam. As Joachim and Harwati Hashim (2021) highlight, this type of natural learning environment encourages deeper engagement with the material and fosters a more authentic demonstration of skills and competencies.

THE INTEGRATION OF CEFR INTO CLASSROOM BASED ASSESSMENT

The introduction of CEFR into the English language curriculum breathes new ways on how the assessment is implemented in ESL classrooms. According to the Council of Europe (2011), there are three main ways which CEFR can be useful in the assessment context. These includes:

- i. For specifying the test and assessment content.
- ii. For deliberating the criteria in the learning objectives both in the relation of assessment on the language skills and in the continuous teacher, peer, or self-assessment.
- iii. For describing the proficiency levels in the current test and assessment and enabling the comparison to be made across different systems of qualifications.

The Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) which aligns with CEFR employs a common reference levels and 'Can Do' descriptors to measure students' proficiency in language learning. In this context, the proficiency levels are described into six descriptor levels ranging from A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. This contradicts to the previous language assessment system which segregating

students' proficiency levels into generic labels of beginner, intermediate, and advanced. According to Holzknicht et al. (2018), the infusion of CEFR into CBA can provide a more accurate and reliable evaluations of students' language abilities. It is because, this new assessment climate enables teachers to assist students in self-evaluation and consequently motivates them to be responsible for their learning process. In addition, through the integration of CEFR, it has emphasised on the importance of balancing the assessment of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in ESL instruction. This aligns with the Ministry of Education (2019) which highlights the importance of integrating phonics into basic literacy, penmanship, language arts, and critical and creative thinking, particularly emphasising higher-order thinking skills. Additionally, the CBA that aligns with CEFR emphasises the importance of employing the 4Cs (communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration) in teaching and learning. By embedding the 4Cs, the system ensures that students become proficient English users. Thus, this objective coincides with the efforts of other Asian nations, such as Singapore, China, Taiwan, and Japan, to improve their English language standards (Erdogan, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study focuses on the teachers' conceptions of CBA in the context of Malaysian secondary school ESL classrooms. Hence, to shed light on this aspect this study adopts a qualitative approach as it is a useful approach to explore and deepen the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Rahman (2014) further supported that the qualitative approach is pertinent in the study of educational reform as it can help the researcher to discover various contextual factors which helps to probe a thorough understanding on the reform effort. In determining the research design for this study, the researcher adhered to Yin's (2014) recommendations to assess the appropriateness of employing a case study methodology. Yin (2014) posits that selecting a case study design should involve careful consideration of several factors; the form of the research questions, the degree of control of behavioural events, and whether the investigation focuses on contemporary phenomena. Consequently, the researcher evaluated these factors which were the exploratory nature of research questions, the absence of control over participants' behaviours, and the emphasis on current events in which to ensure alignment with Yin's criteria for a case study approach. As this study aims to explore teachers' conceptions of CBA contexts without exerting any control over their actions, concentrating on events occurring during the transition to assessment reform in education, therefore, the case study design is deemed appropriate for capturing the in-depth perspectives of teachers as they navigate these reforms. Merriam (2009) asserts that a case study design is particularly suitable for exploring detailed perspectives of phenomena within their real-life contexts. Similarly, Rahman (2014) supports the utility of case studies, especially in understanding stakeholders' experiences with the implementation of educational reforms. These viewpoints further validate the choice of case study methodology for the present research.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The present study collected data from the population of ESL teachers who are currently in-service in public secondary schools which resides in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. Pulau Pinang consists of Malay-medium and non-Malay-medium national-type schools that differ in terms of their medium of instructional policy. In Malay-medium national schools, the Malay Language has become their medium of instruction. Whereas, in non-Malay-medium national-type schools, their medium of instruction is mostly their mother tongues. This diversity allows for a comprehensive exploration of the impact of CBA across different linguistic and cultural contexts. However, all these schools follow a common syllabus, and they also apply the same assessment system which is CBA. The participants in this study were identified as primary internal stakeholders acting as change agents in the implementation of CBA at the grassroot level. According to Abdul Razak et al. (2023), these individuals are the stakeholders who play the crucial role in executing the policy. In order to disseminate samples from the larger population, a purposive sampling technique was used (Creswell, 2012). Patton (2002) affirmed that this approach can allow the researcher to select participants who can provide “information rich” data in relation to the context of the study. Thus, to facilitate the purposive sampling, a criterion-based selection method was employed by streamlining specific criteria among the participations as Merriam (2009) affirmed that this strategy can help researchers to probe into deeper details on the studied phenomenon.

Hence, the ESL teachers involved in the study were required to be in-service teachers within public Malaysian secondary schools. These teachers were expected to hold at least a bachelor's degree in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Education and have more than three years of experience in the ELT field. The criterion was established to ensure that the teachers had sufficient time to experience significant changes in the assessment system (Klenowski et al., 2014), specifically the transition from a high-stakes examination system to CBA. This duration allowed them to adapt to the evolving assessment landscape, engage in professional development programs, and gain practical experience in implementing CBA. The participants were also selected based on their educational background in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or TESOL, with a specific focus on the major they pursued, either English or Linguistics. This distinction provided a more nuanced understanding of how different academic orientations may influence teachers' perspectives and practices regarding CBA. Additionally, these teachers must have attended the CEFR training and workshops conducted by the MOE as well as participated in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within their respective schools. Consequently, the study collected data from nine Malaysian secondary school ESL teachers. Since the qualitative approach was used in this study, Creswell (1998) suggested that 5 to 25 participants would be enough number to meet the purpose of the study. This can also be supported by Morse (1994), who claimed to have at least 6 participants in building up the qualitative concept of the research. The demographic profiles of these selected participants are presented in TABLE 1 below. To ensure their privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used.

TABLE 1. Participants' Demographic Profile

Participants	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Major	Teaching Experience
Teacher 1	Male	31	B.Ed TESL	English	7 years
Teacher 2	Female	31	B.Ed TESL	English	7 years
Teacher 3	Female	35	M.Ed TESL	Linguistics	8 years
Teacher 4	Female	29	M.Ed TESL	English	5 years
Teacher 5	Male	28	B.Ed TESL	English	4 years

Teacher 6	Male	30	B.Ed TESOL	Linguistics	6 years
Teacher 7	Female	40	B.Ed TESL	English	14 years
Teacher 8	Female	35	B.Ed TESOL	Linguistics	8 years
Teacher 9	Female	33	B.Ed TESL	English	7 years

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This study employed a triangulation method for data collection, combining semi-structured interviews with document analysis. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2017), this approach enhances the reliability and consistency of the findings. The analysis commenced with data gathered through semi-structured interviews, followed by an in-depth examination using document analysis method. By cross-referencing these data sources, the study gained a clearer perspective on how teachers interpret CBA in congruence with the policy guidelines. Assessing teachers' adherence to the policy mandates through this comprehensive approach provided valuable insights into optimizing policy implementation at the grassroots level, where its practical impact is most pronounced. The triangulation process utilized in this study is illustrated in FIGURE 1 below.

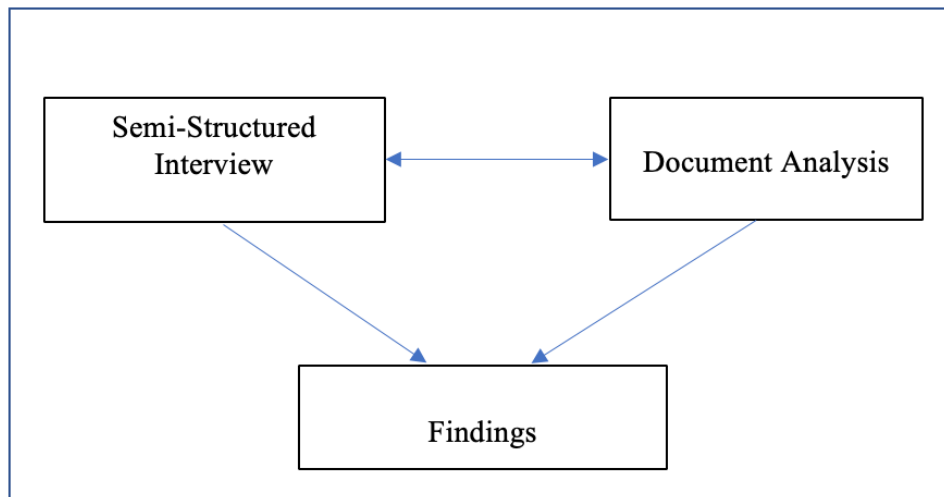


FIGURE 1. Triangulation Procedure of the Research Findings

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

The semi structured interviews served as the primary data collection method to discover teachers' conceptions of CBA in ESL education. Open ended questions were used into the interview protocols as Creswell (2012) affirmed that it can be a useful tool for probing insightful and accurate data as it allows participants to convey their thoughts in their own words. Additionally, Rahman (2014) supported this approach can provide medium for participants to share their subjective ideas, emotions, and perspective in non-control condition which inadvertently facilitates the better understanding on how the policy is understood at the grassroots level. The interview protocols were adopted from Rahman (2014) which focused on the implementation of new curriculum. However, the present study is differed from these adopted protocols as it focuses on the implementation of the new assessment reform which is CBA. In Section A, researchers collected information about the teachers' backgrounds, teaching experience, and academic qualifications. Section B examined teachers' understanding of CBA implementation, whereas Section C focuses on how teachers

define and interpret CBA. In order to maintain consistency and ensure rigor throughout the data collection process, researchers used an interview guide, as Patton (2015) recommended, to stay focused on the core topics during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Each interview, lasting 20 to 30 minutes, was audio-recorded to support detailed and accurate data analysis.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

In order to investigate the congruence of teachers' interpretations on the conceptions of CBA explored in the interview sessions with the policy recommendations, the document analysis method was employed to the data collection. This procedure was carried out by the researchers through the collection of key documents which include the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBLEC) and the CBA Guidebook. These documents outline the execution of CBA policy in ESL education. Through the analysis of these documents, it can facilitate this study to assess how teachers' comprehension toward CBA aligns with the policy recommendations, thus offering insights into their literacy in adapting to the new assessment climate. A document summary form as suggested by Yin (2014) was used to disseminate and extract relevant information for the collected policy documents. This form contains several sections such as the document's date, title, description, content summary, relevance to the research, and reflections. The data gathered through each section enhanced the overall understanding of the documents. This structured approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of the content and helped determine whether teachers' assessment practices were consistent with policy standards (Yin, 2014). The collected documents were labelled sequentially to ensure the clarity and easy reference of analysis process. For example, the first document was labelled "Document Form 1" and referred to as "Doc 1". This labelling system facilitated better document identification and allowed connections to be established between different documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

These data collection procedures commenced when the researchers firstly obtained the research access to the sites by first securing authorization from two primary entities, namely the Planning and Research Development Unit (PRD) of the Ministry of Education and the Penang State Education Department. The approval process was crucial in establishing a solid foundation for conducting the study. Subsequently, the researchers sent an information letter after a preliminary meeting with the school principals before the initial visit to the research sites. During this meeting, the study's objectives were explained, and administrators were fully comprehended and abided by strict confidentiality and data protection protocols. The researchers presented an informed consent document, which the participants thoroughly reviewed and signed, reiterating the researchers' commitment to protecting participants' data and privacy.

The researchers worked together with the ESL instructors that the school administrators recommended. After confirming their willingness to participate, the researchers contacted the educators directly after informing them about the research project through the informed consent process. To ensure effective coordination, the researchers devised a specific interview schedule and meticulously planned all sessions within regular school hours. The primary purpose of designing this strategy was to capture the educational experiences of ESL teachers and their students in the most authentic and representative way possible, thereby enhancing the relevance and significance of the research.

DATA ANALYSIS

To address the research questions, patterns in teachers' conceptions of CBA were identified through an analysis of the interview transcripts. Multiple readings and meticulous examinations of these transcripts resulted in the development of various codes representing teachers' perceptions of CBA. Comparing these codes across participants' datasets allowed key themes to emerge. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted using curriculum standard documents, particularly the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC), to evaluate the alignment between teachers' conceptions of CBA and policy requirements. The procedures for the thematic analysis are illustrated in FIGURE 2 below.

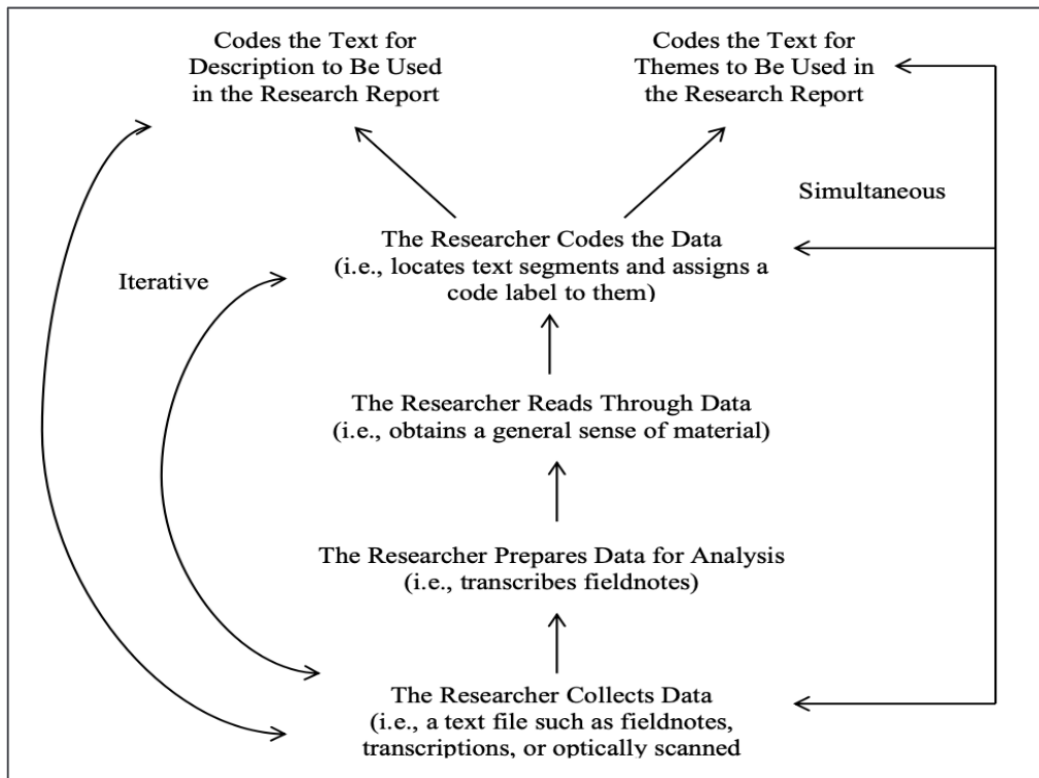


FIGURE 2. Thematic Analysis Procedures.

For the management and organisation of qualitative data in this study, the Atlas.ti software 25.0.1 was employed. As a qualitative data analysis (QDA) tool, Atlas.ti assists researchers in efficiently storing and organising data thus enabling the assignment of labels or codes and simplifying the search for specific texts or words within the dataset (Creswell, 2012). The primary function of such software is not to perform the analysis itself but to alleviate the manual workload associated with data management (Bryman, 2008). In this context the QDA assist researchers to manage data in structured and organized manner. This analytical procedure began with the systematic data preparation. The data collected were segregated into separate files with appropriate separators for each participant. This methodical organisation was essential to facilitate efficient data retrieval and to ensure a coherent and streamlined analysis process.

The next phase in analysing the data involved gaining a comprehensive understanding of the dataset (Cresswell, 2012). To achieve this, the data was systematically examined on a participant-by-participant basis. The analysis began with the interview data from each individual ESL teacher, and this procedure was consistently repeated for all participants. Given the complexity of the research design, it was necessary to develop a systematic classification system to ensure that the data was organized methodically and that no information was lost. Next, the data was explored with the research questions in mind, utilising the established codes and sub codes to formulate themes aimed at answering these questions (Creswell, 2012). The researchers' approach to representing and reporting the findings involved a narrative discussion that provided an in-depth examination of the data analysis. Then, the data were interpreted based on the research questions. The codes and themes were synthesised which were then discussed based on the contemporary literature to shed light on the aims of the study. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, an intercoder reliability assessment (ICR) (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) was also conducted on the emerging themes. The results of Cohen's Kappa analysis of the ICR test shows the coefficient of agreement between coders was $k=0.646$ signifying "substantial agreement" between coders in the coding presented in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings on the teachers' conceptions of CBA. The findings presented in this section were further compared to the information in the curriculum standard document (SBELC) and CBA Guidebook in further discovering the alignment with policy mandates. FIGURE 3 below present the findings of the study.

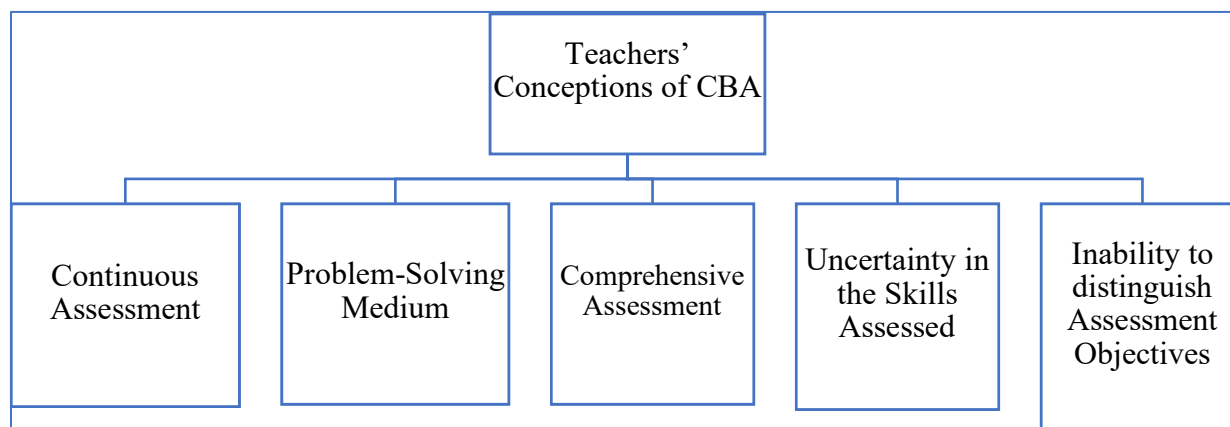


FIGURE 3. Teachers' conceptions of CBA

Pragmatically, the present study discovered that teachers' conceptions of CBA diverse according to their perceptions. This study revealed that majority teachers were able to articulate the aims of CBA which aligns with the curriculum document. However, some of the teachers are still positing a limited understanding of CBA which contradicts the recommendations in the curriculum document. The subsequent sections discuss the teachers' conceptions of CBA in Malaysia ESL classroom.

CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT

Teachers strongly emphasised that the primary objective of implementing CBA was to establish a continuous assessment culture. They argued that CBA represents a shift from traditional, standardized assessment that occurs at set times, typically focusing on final outputs, to an ongoing, formative process embedded within everyday classroom activities. This approach to assessment is designed to be dynamic and responsive to students' needs, allowing teachers to assess student learning and progress continually. For example, Teacher 7 highlighted how CBA is integrated directly into the classroom instruction in the excerpt below.

...it is an assessment used and incorporated in the classroom instruction, and teachers need to be able to assess students from time to time in each lesson...

(T7)

Teacher 5 echoed this sentiment by reflecting on the value of continuous assessment as an essential tool for tracking student development over time. Rather than waiting for a final exam or end-of-year assessment, she viewed teachers can gauge student progress throughout the academic year, identifying both strengths and areas where additional support may be needed.

...you know it's not only assessing students at the end of year like we used to do, but more of tracking students' progress over time...and it think it is beneficial...

(T5)

Moreover, the adoption of CBA was also seen as a way to move away from the previous assessment model used in the KBSM (*Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah*), which relied heavily on standardized testing conducted at fixed times during the school year. According to Teacher 2, this older approach was limited in scope, as assessments were only carried out at specific intervals and focused on a single standardized set of questions. In contrast, CBA is designed to be implemented throughout the learning year, giving students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and growth over time.

...it's a practice to be conducted the whole learning year and not in a specific and stipulated time...

(T2)

Apparently, the teachers' perceptions of CBA closely align with the guidelines outlined in the curriculum standard document (SBELC). The curriculum document emphasizes that the primary goal of CBA is to implement a continuous assessment system that tracks each student's ability to acquire targeted language skills. According to SBELC, classroom assessment is viewed as an ongoing process, carried out through both formal and informal classroom activities to monitor students' cognitive development effectively. An excerpt from SBELC concludes this statement.

The assessment is designed, carried out, and documented by respective teachers. This process is ongoing and may be conducted formally or informally to monitor students' actual proficiency and mastery levels.

(SBELC, 2017, p.18)

PROBLEM-SOLVING MEDIUM

The thematic analysis also found that teachers viewed CBA as a tool to facilitate problem-solving in the classroom, allowing them to identify areas of student difficulty and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. Teachers believed that the data collected through the CBA was invaluable, serving as a repository of insights that could guide necessary adjustments in their teaching approaches. For instance, Teacher 1 highlighted that the CBA was particularly useful in tracking students' progress throughout different topics covered in lessons. This tracking allowed him to gauge the extent to which students were mastering the material as they moved through the curriculum. He found CBA to be an instrumental part of his teaching practice because it enabled him to make real-time, data-driven decisions about where to focus more attention during instruction.

...it is useful for me to chart students' progression, you know, it gives you the insights on the improvisations needed to be catered for my students...

(T1)

Additionally, as students were assessed according to the curriculum standards outline in SBELC, Teacher 7 supported this notion that it helps to pinpoint specific areas of the curriculum content where students were underperforming. This feedback mechanism allowed teachers to tailor their teaching mechanism toward improving these areas, ensuring that students met the required benchmarks.

We are assessing students across the curriculum standards and by doing this it helps us to see which language skills that needs more improvement among the students, and through that it is easier for us to strategize intervention planning for the students...

(T7)

Furthermore, teachers also believed that CBA plays a crucial role in guiding them to reflect on and adapt their classroom instruction. It serves as a feedback mechanism that helps teachers determine whether their teaching strategies are effective in helping students meet their learning objectives. This real-time feedback enables them to make necessary adjustments, refining their teaching methods to focus more on areas where students need additional support. For instance, Teacher 6 shared how the CBA has helped him reassess his own teaching methods.

... it helps me to adjust my teaching method, sometimes when students are not able to achieve the learning objectives it informs me that I have just a high criteria for them to achieve.

(T6)

This adaptive approach underscores the CBA's value as a tool for continuous professional growth, helping teachers not only gauge student performance but also reflect critically on their instructional practices. This aligns to the recommendation of SBELC as shown in the excerpt below.

The main purpose of assessment is to enhance students learning by allowing teachers to refine their instructional strategies, update learning materials, and adjust lesson plans based on post-lesson reflections, external observations, and various assessment methods. This process enables educators to customize their teaching approaches to better align the students' abilities.

(SBELC, 2017, p.18)

COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

The study also highlighted those teachers characterized the CBA as an all-encompassing and integrated system of evaluation. They appreciated the CBA for its holistic nature, as it incorporates both formative and summative assessments, thereby offering a more well-rounded approach to evaluating student progress. This approach contrasts sharply with previous assessment policies, which primarily concentrated on final outcomes or summative judgments of student performance. Teacher 8, as referenced in the following excerpt, provides further evidence of this change, highlighting the positive reception of this more balanced assessment approach.

CBA is actually good as it is holistic. Rather than just by looking the end performance, we can also track students' learning from time to time. Basically, it combines both formative and summative.

(T8)

Additionally, the CBA is regarded as a thorough method for assessing students' overall language proficiency, as it evaluates multiple skills rather than focusing on just one. Teacher emphasised that the CBA places equal importance on assessing the four language skills- reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This represents a departure from the previous assessment system, which primarily focused on reading and writing. The shift toward a more balanced evaluation of all language skills is seen as a positive step toward achieving a well-rounded understanding of students' language abilities.

...an assessment where we evaluate students based on the skills, we want them to develop, especially the four key language skills which are speaking, listening, reading, and writing...

(T9)

...evaluate students in the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It's beneficial because it allows us to understand their overall performance...

(T5)

The analysis of the curriculum document further revealed that the primary goal of the CBA was to offer a holistic and comprehensive evaluation system to assess students' abilities. The SBELC clearly outlines the use of both formative and summative assessments, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

Two types of school assessments are implemented: formative and summative assessment.

(SBELC, 2017, p.18)

The findings from the preceding sections suggest that most participants supported the objectives of the new education reform. They demonstrated an understanding of the need for a CBA with the new curriculum structure, indicating awareness of changes in the educational system. The participants' statements in the discussion showed that their understanding of the new assessment system was consistent with the curriculum document. However, while most participants appeared to be aware of the new assessment system's requirements, interview data revealed that their comprehension of the aims behind CBA was limited. The teachers were unable to fully articulate this evaluation method, which could hinder effective implementation of CBA. This issue is explored in the following section, where it becomes evident that the teachers' inattentiveness reflects their negative perceptions of the assessment reform.

UNCERTAINTY IN THE SKILLS ASSESSED

Some teachers found it difficult to fully grasp the comprehensive nature of CBA in assessing language proficiency. They perceived CBA as limited to evaluating only the four fundamental language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This perception was evident in the statements of Teacher 2 and Teacher 4, who both emphasised that CBA primarily focused on assessing these core skills.

...particularly the four language skills, namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing... (T2)

...evaluate students across the four skills of reading, writing, listening. And speaking... (T4)

This view contrasts with the SBELC, which advocates a modular approach that extends beyond assessing these four primary skills by incorporating Grammar and Literature in Action. The following excerpt from SBELC highlights broader perspective on language assessment.

The SBELC adopts a modular approach, aiming to provide students with meaningful and successful experiences in English by integrating grammar practice and continuous engagement with the four language skills (listening, speaking, and writing), alongside Literature in Action. This approach ensures that all language components- Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar, and Literature in Action-receive due attention and emphasis.

(SBELC, 2017, p.8)

Since the curriculum follows a modular structure, a teacher may begin a lesson focusing on listening skills, while other skills such as speaking, reading, and writing are integrated incidentally (SBELC,2017). This focus may span one or more lessons until the objectives are met. The teacher can then shift to speaking skills, naturally incorporating listening, reading, and writing. When reading or writing is the primary focus, the other skills are secondary, and SBELC does not prescribe a rigid sequence. Consequently, the new curriculum emphasized the integration of multiple language skills during assessment. Grammar elements are embedded within each skill area, as teachers incorporate grammar instruction while teaching these language skills. Before introducing a new topic, teachers should select relevant grammar items to be integrated across all language components.

Additionally, the Literature in Action (LiA) component highlights the role of literature, incorporating poetry, drama, short stories, graphic novels, and novels to foster reading habits and critical thinking. LiA encourages students to be creative and express themselves freely (SBELC, 2017). However, the findings reveal a disconnect with the SBELC framework. None of the teachers explicitly mentioned or emphasized the modular approach in classroom assessments, suggesting a limited understanding of this aspect. This gap mirrors what Mligo (2016) observed in Tanzania, where curriculum reform towards a child-centred pedagogy failed to produce the intended classroom transformations due to teachers' superficial understanding and reliance on familiar practices. Similarly, Navenglosky et al. (2018) argued that effective implementation of policy reform depends on teacher engagement, clear instructional guidance, and professional support. Without such structures, teachers may misinterpret or partially implement policy, as observed in this study.

INABILITY TO DISTINGUISH ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

Furthermore, the study revealed that the aim of the SBELC was unclear to some teachers, with instances of insensitivity and inattentiveness to the curriculum changes. Some teachers viewed the SBELC as being similar to the previous Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM). This was evident in the statement made by Teacher 4, who could not distinguish the differences between the new and old policies.

...it is not relevant to the context of current education now. SBELC were not updated, they are just carried forward year after year. Nothing has changed in the document compared to previous years. So, it is not relevant...

(T4)

Teacher 4 failed to recognize that the KBSM focused on developing students' language proficiency to prepare them for future workplace needs, while the SBELC aims to enhance students' communicative competence by applying language knowledge to real-world situations, as shown in TABLE 2 below.

TABLE 2. The difference between KBSM and SBELC Aims

KBSM	SBELC
The English Language Curriculum aims to enhance learners' proficiency in English to meet their needs in everyday life, knowledge acquisition, and future workplace requirements. (KBSM, 2003, p.1)	The SBELC aims to equip students to communicate confidently, proficiently, and competently; to be knowledgeable and respectful of other cultures, and to be skilled in emerging literacies. It also emphasise on improving students' ability to make informed decisions by incorporating critical and analytical thinking, and to collaborate with others to solve problems creatively and innovatively in real-world situations. (SBELC, 2017, p.3)

This misunderstanding underscores the challenge posed by teachers' limited ability to fully understand and adapt to curriculum changes, resulting in considerable resistance to policy adjustments. This resistance does not primarily stem from a lack of pedagogical knowledge; rather, it arises from their difficulty in adapting to the new curriculum framework. During the initial stages of the transition, teachers relied heavily on the structure of the previous curriculum they were accustomed to, making it difficult for them to embrace the principles of the new one. This situation reflects the concept proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), who suggested that newcomers to any practice, such as teachers adjusting to a new curriculum, initially hold diverse perspectives that evolve as they engage with the community of practice. Over time, these perspectives converge as teachers integrate their past experiences with the new curriculum, ultimately leading to their full participation in the new educational practices.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study offers critical insights into Malaysian ESL teachers' conceptions of Classroom-Based Assessment and how their interpretations align or diverge from policy mandates. While most teachers demonstrate an awareness of CBA's objectives, gaps in comprehension persist, particularly regarding its holistic nature, modular approach, and role in fostering authentic

language assessment. The findings reveal that teachers generally perceive CBA as a continuous, problem solving, and comprehensive assessment tool, highlighting their understanding of policy objectives outlined in SBELC. However, limitations in distinguishing broader assessment components indicate inconsistencies in policy translation, suggesting a need for stronger professional development interventions and clearer instructional guidelines. This research advances assessment literacy and educational reform theories, particularly in the domain of teacher agency and policy implementation. By exploring teachers' perspectives within an evolving assessment framework, it reinforces the argument that teachers' interpretative processes shape policy execution at the grassroots level. The findings further align with constructivist learning theories, demonstrating how formative assessments facilitates progressive, learner-centred evaluation rather than rigid summative judgments. Additionally, this study contributes to curriculum change models, offering empirical insights into the challenges of transitioning from high-stakes examination systems to continuous assessment frameworks.

The findings underscore key implications for both assessment practices and policy refinement. The study suggest for strengthening the professional development. Policymakers must prioritize targeted training programs to bridge knowledge gaps, ensuring teachers grasp modular assessment principles and differentiated skills evaluation beyond traditional methods. Moreover, this study recommends the refinement of policy documents. In this context, curriculum guides should incorporate clear, structured implementation frameworks, explicitly detailing how CBA integrates complementary skills (grammar & literature in action) alongside core language skills. Additionally, school leadership and teacher autonomy also needs to be empowered. The reforms should facilitate teacher-driven assessment innovations, positioning instructors as active agents rather than passive implementers of policy directives. Despite its contributions, this study presents limitations that warrant further exploration. First and foremost, the research only focuses on teachers' perceptions on the CBA conceptions. Hence, to highlight a comprehensive view on the policy enactment, future research can further delve into teachers' practices in execute assessment within CBA framework. Future longitudinal studies can also employ quantitative methods to discover the effectiveness of the approaches used by teachers in enacting CBA. These explorations can shed lights into a deeper comprehension on the implementation of CBA in Malaysian education system.

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