



School-based Assessment and Assessment for Learning: An Exploratory Study of Hong Kong English Teachers' Practices

Angus Cheng

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Introduction

Hong Kong, like many other places of Confucian-heritage cultural background, has developed a strong examination-oriented system (Carless, 2010; Pong & Chow, 2002). Under the current education system, local secondary school students have to sit for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) at the end of Secondary 6 (Grade 12). The HKDSE is a high-stakes public examination as it is used to measure students' attainment throughout their six-year secondary education and the examination results usually have significant influence on learners' future pathways, including further education and employment. With the growing influence of social constructivism on assessment, the idea of Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been incorporated and promoted in the educational reform in Hong Kong over the past two decades to improve students' learning (Berry, 2008; Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2001).

For the English Language subject, school-based assessment (SBA) has been introduced in the public examination since 2007 to improve students' English learning in the senior secondary level (Carless, 2010; Qian, 2014). Although SBA is conducted in schools and graded by the teachers, the assessment result is also a component of the overall public examination result. In other words, SBA serves both formative and summative purposes. Up until now, research on the area of English SBA in Hong Kong is still minimal. Earlier studies mainly focused on the SBA implemented in the Hong Kong Certificate Examination (HKCEE) under the old education system (e.g., Cheng, Andrews, & Yu, 2011; Davison, 2007; Qian, 2014); while studies related to the latest examination system mainly focused on students' perceptions and performance (e.g., Gan, Oon, & Davison, 2017; Tong & Adamson, 2015). In light of this gap, this exploratory study investigated the relationship between SBA in the English language and AfL practices based on the experience of teachers. This study may shed light on some possible ways to improve the implementation of English SBA in Hong Kong.

Literature Review

English SBA in Hong Kong

SBA refers to assessments that are administered in schools throughout the teaching and learning process (CDC, 2015; Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority [HKEAA], 2012). The English SBA in the HKDSE consists of two major parts. The first part is based on the reading or viewing programme, whereas the second part is based on the elective modules taught in class (CDC, 2015). Since SBA aims to evaluate students' speaking ability, the assessments are conducted in forms of both group interaction and individual presentation (CDC, 2015). In the first part, students are required to read and watch a variety of texts throughout their three years of senior secondary education (HKEAA, 2012). In the second part, the assessment tasks are aligned with the actual teaching in English lessons as each school may select different elective modules within the curriculum (HKEAA, 2012). Students are given chances to express their ideas and reflect upon their learning experiences through speaking. The whole SBA contributes 15% to the overall grade of the English Language subject in the HKDSE.

Since SBA in Hong Kong carries both formative and summative functions, there are various reasons why it was introduced as a component in the HKDSE. In terms of summative purposes, one of the primary reasons for having SBA is to increase the validity of the speaking assessment, as some areas, like presentation skills, cannot be evaluated in the public examination settings (CDC, 2015). Moreover, the reliability of the speaking assessment can also be enhanced. Since SBA is conducted by the language teachers over a certain period of time, it helps reduce the reliance on the one-off speaking assessment in the public examination (Carless, 2010; CDC, 2015). The teachers know their students best, and multiple chances are available for them to conduct a more comprehensive evaluation of the students' speaking abilities (HKEAA, 2012). The anxiety level of the students to speak in English can also be reduced as students use the language under a familiar environment with their classmates as audience or assessment groupmates (Tong & Adamson, 2015).

Regarding the formative purposes, SBA can bring positive washback to English teaching and learning. The English SBA can promote extensive reading as the speaking assessments are related to reading or viewing programmes in schools (HKEAA, 2012). This suggests that students are encouraged to read different books and watch different movies and thus develop their reading habit. Students' overall language proficiency can be improved if they have more language exposure outside class. Furthermore, students can improve their speaking throughout the SBA process. The ongoing process of SBA and constructive feedback offered by teachers encourage students to work on areas where improvements are needed (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008; HKEAA, 2012). This shows that SBA can promote continuous learning rather than simply focusing on the assessment grade. At the same time, teachers can benefit from SBA as they are fostered to develop good teaching practice by embedding purposeful assessment tasks into daily teaching settings (CDC, 2015).

SBA and AfL

Based on the formative purposes, it is clear that the incorporation of SBA into the English Curriculum in Hong Kong is probably a result of the emerging advocacy of AfL across the globe. Some common principles of AfL described in the latest curriculum guide and various guidelines are summarized as follows:

- Providing timely constructive feedback
- Involving students in their own learning
- Providing students with clear expectations
- Refining teaching strategies

(Assessment Reform Group [ARG], 2002; CDC, 2017; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006)

In Western educational systems, there is a long history of SBA or AfL being included in senior secondary curriculum or high-stakes examination. For example, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have included AfL practices in senior secondary level for over 30 years (Sadler, 1989; Whetton, 2009). In Asian contexts, various countries like Singapore and Malaysia have also been trying to shift their assessment practices towards AfL in recent years, making assessments an integral part of teaching and learning (Leong, Cheng, & Tan, 2014; Rashid, Abdul Rahman, & Yunus, 2017). Drawing on AfL experiences around the world, the design of the English SBA in Hong Kong actually echoes with some key AfL principles such as providing constructive feedback and helping learners to improve (ARG, 2002). In short, the introduction of SBA in English Language in Hong Kong is a fundamental initiative in shifting the emphasis on assessment from solely grades to students' learning and progression.

Opinions about English SBA

Teachers and students are the main stakeholders involved in SBA. Existing research has explored both teachers and students' perceptions of English SBA. Students have mixed perceptions about SBA but their views are negative in general. It is found that although some students feel relaxed and motivated in SBA, in particular the group interaction task, and think the assessment process stimulates their higher-order thinking, most of them do not find the feedback from their teachers beneficial to their learning and doubt the advantages SBA in English learning (Gao, 2009; Tong & Adamson, 2015). Students' responses also suggest that they are not able to relate SBA to other aspects of English learning and they rely heavily on their teachers in formulating ways of improvement (Tong & Adamson, 2015). Moreover, it is found that some students, particularly those with lower perceived language competence, consider SBA as another English test rather than a learning process (Cheng et al., 2011; Gao, 2009;). Thus, most students view SBA only as a component of the public examination and such perception may hinder them from optimizing their learning opportunity in SBA.

Regarding teachers' perceptions, studies were conducted based on the implementation of SBA in HKCEE, the old examination. Teachers generally have positive views towards the introduction of SBA in the English Curriculum as they agree with the philosophy of AfL (Davison, 2007; Qian, 2014). Most teachers acknowledge that the ongoing nature of SBA and constructive feedback can help students improve their speaking (Davison, 2007; Qian, 2014). However, teachers do have some concerns over the implementation of SBA including teachers' workload, insufficient time, the fairness and value of SBA (Davison, 2007; Qian, 2014). Workload is found to be the most pressing issue as quite a number of teachers expressed that they have to spend a substantial amount of time to prepare students with relevant input for SBA (Qian, 2014). Some teachers are worried about the fairness of the SBA results, as different schools may have assessment tasks and materials of varying difficulty (Davison, 2007; Qian, 2014). Finally, some teachers also suggest that learners' English exposure may not be sustainable as students will probably stop reading after the SBA (Qian, 2014). Teachers generally hold positive views regarding the incorporation of SBA, but whether SBA can effectively improve teaching and learning in English hinges on how the concerns are addressed.

As the task designer and assessor, English teachers definitely have a key role in realizing the pedagogical values of SBA. Adopting a qualitative approach, the central guiding question of this exploratory study is: How does the implementation of English SBA realizes AfL practices?

Methodology

Participants

Data were collected from four secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong who have implemented SBA. Representative sampling was used to recruit the participants. The teachers, whose

background information is summarized in Table 1, are teaching in different school contexts. This exploratory study did not intend to reflect the situation of all secondary schools in Hong Kong. However, attempts were made to include teachers from different teaching contexts. It is likely that the data collected can reasonably show how schools with different learners' backgrounds implement the SBA in Hong Kong.

TABLE 1
The Participants' Background

Teacher	Background
Teacher A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of English Panel • Band 1 English-medium school
Teacher B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy Head of English Panel • Former SBA Coordinator • Band 1 English-medium school
Teacher C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Teacher • In the second year of teaching career • Band 2 English-medium school
Teacher D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy Head of English Panel • Band 3 Chinese-medium school

Data Collection and Analysis

To minimize additional workload imposed on the participants, who are full-time teachers, online interviews were conducted via email in order to elicit in-depth responses about their SBA practices (Salmons, 2014). A total of 10 interview questions were designed and sent to the participants. Questions covered issues like the SBA practices in their schools, their views towards SBA, and their suggestions on how to improve SBA. All the responses were answered in English. After the responses were received, the data were compiled in a document so as to facilitate the analysis and interpretation. Content analysis techniques were used to identify the major themes in the responses with reference to the common AfL principles (Burns, 2009). A second coder, specializing in English Education, was invited. The author and coder discussed the themes together, analyzed individually, and then discussed any discrepancies.

Findings and Discussion

Providing Timely Constructive Feedback

It is a positive sign to see that the teachers provided various forms of useful feedback to the students when implementing the English SBA. From the interview responses, all teachers shared that in addition to providing students with their scores, they would give descriptive feedback, in verbal or written form, to the students after the SBA. Teachers B and C even provide both spoken and written feedback to their students. Teachers' comments are important to promote learning, as they can highlight students' strengths and weaknesses, and hence provide directions for improvements (Berry, 2008; Stiggins et al., 2006). Responses suggest that the participants recognize that their comments are essential in supporting students' learning and thus they included this practice in SBA.

Involving Students in Their Own Learning

When it comes to the involvement of students in their own learning, only two teachers included specific activities that encourage students to take part in the assessment process. According to the AfL principles, students can contribute to their own learning through activities like goal setting, peer evaluation and self-evaluation, as these activities can prompt students to monitor their own learning

progress and be more reflective (ARG, 2002; Berry, 2008; Stiggins et al., 2006). For example, regarding the use of peer evaluation, only Teacher C explained that their school included this activity when other students are doing the SBA assessment. Other schools do not adopt this practice, and Teacher B even commented that 'it is too time-consuming, and since the assessments for all students have to be done within a time limit, to ensure fairness, students may not manage to evaluate others while readying themselves for their own presentations'. This may imply that teachers may not include peer assessment due to time constraint and fairness, as SBA also has a summative purpose.

For goal setting and self-evaluation, Teacher C discussed how students in his school keep a portfolio which include some guiding questions for ease of reading the texts and the scoresheets with feedback. Students can choose the reading text themselves based on the guiding questions. Similarly, Teacher A explained that instead of a portfolio, each student is required to compile an SBA journal which includes some reflections on the tasks they have done in class, article summaries and movie reviews. These responses may show that some schools attempt to engage students more in their learning through goal setting and reflections on their own performance by including an SBA portfolio or journal as a component.

The accessibility of recorded videos or audios in the SBA is not that common for students. Teacher D shared that students can reflect upon their own performance by watching the recorded video or listening to the audio. By doing so, she believes that students can learn from each other. Teacher B believed it 'should be a yes' when asked about students' access to assessment recordings. Her response may imply that it is possible for students to review their performances, but this is probably not a common practice in their school. For the other teachers, they commented that the recorded videos are not available for the students and the recordings are used for standardization and record keeping purposes. In short, the potential of the recordings as prompts for self-reflection may not be fully utilized by the teachers.

Providing Students with Clear Expectations

It seems that some teachers may assume students know their expectations or the assessment criteria of the English SBA and do not place much emphasis in this area. According to Berry (2008), letting students understand the marking criteria can effectively improve learning as students understand what they need to achieve. Teachers in Band 1 schools tend to share their expectations of good performance with the students using sample videos from HKEAA. From their responses, both Teacher A and B shared that 'teachers may show some sample videos from HKEAA to improve [students' speaking] quality and skills' and '[teachers] would show videos of outstanding performances as demonstration'. These responses reflect that teachers in top banding schools tend to share their expectations and standard of high-quality work using the sample videos. However, for Band 2 and 3 school contexts, there is no evidence of using the videos in class, based on the interview responses. Moreover, none of the four teachers expressed that they would discuss the assessment rubrics of SBA with the students in the pre-assessment stage. This may imply that either the teachers may have neglected incorporating such practice in their own teaching or they did not actually include such practice when implementing SBA.

Refining Teaching Strategies

One essential principle of AfL is to adjust the teaching based on the assessment outcome (Berry, 2008). However, the SBA results seem to have little effect on teaching. When asked how SBA results influence their teaching, Teacher A gave a brief answer 'Not at all'. Teacher C also believed SBA results do not affect his teaching and elaborated that '[teachers] just have to read and tick their SBA entries'. Teacher D did share that the results influence her to 'motivate [students] to read different texts and encourage them to look at things in different perspectives. In this case, the influence of SBA results on teaching seems to be more content-related instead of language-related. However, as discussed previously that teachers do provide feedback on students' speaking performance, it seems unlikely for teachers to go any further forward to address the issues in subsequent English lessons on speaking skills.

Pedagogical Implications

Current practices of English SBA implementation may not be effectively realizing AfL principles to promote teaching and learning. Teachers may consider introducing the SBA portfolio to the students so as to involve students more throughout the learning process. A portfolio is ‘a purposeful collection of students’ works that demonstrate to students and others of their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas’ (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 99). With an SBA portfolio, teachers can guide students to keep relevant materials in an organized way. For example, materials may include some preparation notes, reading record, self-evaluation checklist, reflections and even video/audio recordings. The reflections and self-evaluation checklist can be done after the SBA task so as to reduce students’ cognitive load during the assessment. Teachers can also guide students to write short goal cards/notes (Figure 1) based on their weaknesses in speaking so as to encourage improvement in particular. If the practice of portfolio becomes routine, a considerable amount of class time can be saved as those evaluation activities can be done outside class. Therefore, an SBA portfolio would probably make SBA more meaningful as students would be fostered to monitor their own learning using a continuous record of their development.

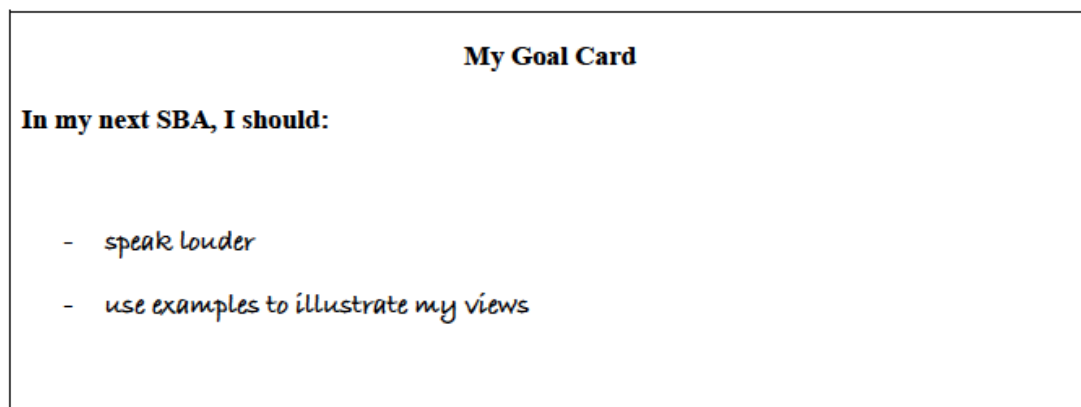


Figure 1. Sample goal card.

In addition, when teachers are preparing students for SBA, they can include some pre-SBA activities like discussing the assessment rubrics with the students and watching HKEAA exemplar samples. As discussed above, sharing the marking criteria is useful for students’ learning. Students would better understand the purpose and requirements of the SBA tasks if rubrics were shared with the students (Bryant & Timmins, 2002; Panadero, Tapia, & Huertas, 2012). The use of video samples can also complement the descriptions in the assessment criteria, as videos demonstrate the expected speaking performance. With both assessment criteria and demonstration, students would probably understand what level they are expected to achieve and set more specific goals for themselves.

Finally, teachers themselves should utilize the SBA results to adjust their teaching. Assessment results give teachers useful information about students’ achievement. Teachers can make good use of such information when they plan their future teaching in order to help learners make progress (ARG, 2002). For example, if most students do not perform well in turn-taking skills, teachers may address this in the speaking lessons after the SBA so that students would gain support and have chances to improve their weaknesses after receiving the feedback of the SBA. Thus, to maximize the benefits of the formative purposes of SBA, teachers should have follow-ups after each SBA and take students’ performance into account in lesson planning.

Conclusion

It should be noted that this exploratory study is qualitative in nature and the SBA practices discussed may not be able to reflect English SBA in Hong Kong as a whole since the sample size is small. Nevertheless, teachers from diverse school contexts were invited, and the data would reasonably demonstrate some common practices of SBA of English teachers in Hong Kong. Further studies in the area of English SBA may adopt a quantitative approach such as questionnaire, so as to capture the general situation in Hong Kong. Students' perceptions towards their SBA experience may also bring interesting insights.

All in all, this current study has explored how AfL practices are realized in SBA in the Hong Kong context. Based on the teachers' responses, it seems that the English SBA only realizes AfL practices to some extent. It is expected that the present research would bring insights to the incorporation of AfL at senior secondary level and raise teachers' awareness of improving assessment practices. It is hoped that continuous investigation and reflection on assessment development will be practised by both researchers and teachers so as to enhance the overall quality of teaching and learning.

The Author

Angus Cheng is an English teacher at a secondary school in Hong Kong as well as a master's student in Applied English Linguistics in the Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests in the field of applied linguistics are discourse analysis, genre-based instruction and second language writing.

Department of English
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
3/F, Fung King Hey Building
Shatin, NT, Hong Kong
Phone: (+852)96618038
Email: anguschh@link.cuhk.edu.hk

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