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# Employing Harvey's Dialogic Approach Beyond Member Checking Technique: A Three Case Study in a Malaysian Primary School Classroom About Formative Assessment

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**Abstract:** In any qualitative study, the question of validity and reliability often becomes an issue to the extent that questions are asked about whether any rigour was applied in carrying out the study. Qualitative data is 'interpretive' this means that the researcher brings his/her own perspective to the interpretation by building patterns, categories and themes through learning and understanding the pedagogical beliefs of the participants. This also means that a researcher needs to be careful and precise when selecting her themes and how the data will be derived in her findings. Thus, the study adopted multiple methods and multiple sources of data to triangulate the findings as well as to determine which participants claimed to have an understanding or knowledge of the Malaysian formative assessment or to have experienced a significant change in practices since its introduction. Multiple sources of data were used, comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or places or interview data gathered from people with varying perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same individuals. The researcher also returned to each school to have my three participants validate my findings (to agree or disagree with them) and to determine whether they had something further to explain about their own pedagogical beliefs and actions regarding formative assessment. In other words, she applied a member checking 'dialogic approach' to deal with the validity of the study rather than just depending on the researcher's own interpretation of the teachers' practices.

**Keywords:** Formative Assessment, Member Checking, Validity, Reliability

## 1. Introduction

SBA began implementation in 2011 and is defined as a holistic form of assessment by which to measure progress in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains encompassing intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical aspects [11]. Malaysian primary school language teachers may be struggling with the implementation of SBA, and this provides part of the rationale for looking at SBA from teachers' perspectives. As Burn (2010) asserts, teachers usually want to be effective and provide quality learning experiences for their learners [2]. However, teachers might also implement SBA without having a clear understanding of what they are actually meant to do. The researcher's intention is therefore to investigate what teachers do and

their reasons for so doing, through exploring the beliefs and practices of a small group of teachers in Eastern Malaysia. Such an investigation may help increase our understanding of how educational change is introduced and interpreted at a classroom level in primary schools in a Southeast Asian context and may suggest some ways for curriculum developers to support primary school teachers when they are faced with education reforms in Malaysia and in other places which share the same context.

SBA is an example of the kind of major educational reform which education ministries are constantly introducing into systems around the world [12]. As we will see, a large volume of research literature has emerged which discusses this topic, analyses the factors which promote change and this study will add to this body of literature.

## 2. Employing Harvey's 'Dialogic Approach' for Member Checking

As stated earlier, in any qualitative research the question of validity and reliability often becomes an issue in qualitative research to the extent that questions are asked about whether any rigour was applied in carrying out the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call this concept 'credibility, dependability and transferability'. Internal credibility or validity concerns questions of how the research findings match up to reality, whether they capture what is really happening and whether the study 'hinges on the meaning of reality' [7]. In dealing with these issues, the researcher suggests of employing Harvey's dialogic approach (2014) in which she finds most reliable and effective in dealing with the validity rather than depending on my own interpretations. This approach is based on Harvey's member-checking strategy in communicating participants' stories. Her idea of member checking is derived from Lincoln and Guba's (1985) proposed methodology, that is 'taking ideas back to research participants for their confirmation … [and/or] to gather material to elaborate your categories' [5]. However, Harvey's dialogic approach goes beyond the method described in Lincoln and Guba and involves participants further in the research process through series of dialogues, thus ensuring the rigour and trustworthiness of the study itself. Harvey's concept was adapted from her reading of Bakthin's explanation of 'dialogism':

All utterances are *dialogic*, meaning that the past and present meet and co-exist in the utterance. Thus *dialogism* is about the relationship utterances enter into with other utterances; all utterances have a history and a present, and all utterances want to be heard and responded [5].

Harvey further explains:

Within the utterance is an inherent, dynamic tension between the past and present: so, just as the past shapes the present, the present also shapes the past. Through this, the individual voice is shaped. No single utterance can be understood separately from its contexts of use. The utterance is an individual act but not a *purely* individual act, as it always springs from what has gone before it. This relation between utterance and response means that all language is dialogic; therefore, language is always *relational* [5].

As such, during an interview, 'both speakers listen and respond, actively participating in the construction of the stories they bring to each other' [5]. This means that through this process, the researcher and the participant reflect and communicate to gain a more in-depth and rich understanding of the participants' stories.

## 3. Prior to Member-Checking

For this three case study, the researcher adopted multiple methods and multiple sources of data to triangulate my findings. The idea of applying multiple methods of data collection refers, for example, to checking what one has been told in an interview against what was observed on site or what has been read in a document which is relevant to the topic of interest [9]. The idea of using three small sample size because it allows for more in-depth analysis and thus results in a much richer outcome in terms of data collection [4]. For the classroom observations in which the study applied a cross-checked analysis to gain the respondents' views of their own practices and conducted a follow-up interview with each of the participants after each observation. In addition, the study adopted multiple sources of data, for example, comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or places or interview data gathered from people with varying perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same individuals.

A telephone interview was also conducted (not recorded, as requested) with an education official in the Ministry of Education Malaysia. The reason was to ask the person to talk the researcher through the ideas behind the implementation of School Based Assessment (SBA) in the Malaysian primary schools and the importance of SBA implementation, and whether the primary school teachers were implementing the SBA and what the barriers might be in the implementation. The officer in the department was able to provide the study with in-depth information about the KSSR primary school curriculum and the SBA. Although the researcher was not able to contact a person from the department which had actually created the SBA policy, the study gleaned some valuable information from the officer who agreed to talk about SBA [6].

## 4. The Participants' Stories

### Beliefs About Formative Assessment

Before proceeding with the study, the researcher should state that she is well aware of the possible criticism of this type of research, where the data elicited may not constitute the 'teachers' principled rationales but rather post hoc rationalisation (i.e. explanation constructed retrospectively)' [14]. However, the researcher is confident that the teachers were interviewed and observed from different schools articulated their beliefs honestly and presented similarly honest accounts of their experiences, for the following reasons. The study began with a preliminary interview with each teacher, followed by a one-month spent in each school, observing and interviewing other teachers and being involved in the school's activities, besides conducting classroom observations and post-observation interviews. After the data were put into themes, the researcher returned to the teachers a year later to share and validate my findings and to allow the teachers to explain further their own beliefs and actions regarding SBA [6]. The study applied a member-checking 'dialogic approach', as suggested by Harvey (2014). Harvey explains that a 'dialogic approach' goes beyond the method described (in Lincoln and Guba) and involves the participants further in the research process through a series of dialogues, thus providing rigour and trustworthiness for the study itself [5].

### Liz Story

Liz assesses her pupils by giving many conventional types of worksheets (e.g. matching sentences to pictures, mostly

filling in the gap) to the students, one worksheet after another. Her teaching method is somehow conventional too (repetition, memorisation, drilling).

*Extract 3:* (liz/co1/07-15/L98-L117)

T: We start *ah*. This—

P: This—

T: is—

P: is—

T: my—

P: my—

T: mum.

P: mum.

T: Class, read.

P: This-is-my-mum.

T: OK, class read. 1-2-3.

P: This-is-my-mum.

T: OK, good.

P: This-is-a-mug.

T: OK, again. Ok, 1, 2, 3, read.

P: This-is-a-mug.

T: OK, number 3.

P: This-is-a-mat.

T: Good. Number 4.

P: This-is-a-moon.

The way she conducts her lessons without group work and focusing on the teacher-to-student approach indicates her traditional and conventional preference of teaching and assessment. When I asked whether she conducted repetition, drilling and revision activities with her new classroom, she answered that she did, but later, she noticed that they got bored with the activity, so she needed to create a variety of activities to get her learners interested in learning the English language. This also meant that Liz would give different set of assessments to each different group of learners. This means that she provides individualized assessment for the group which she identifies that pick up quickly in the lesson and another different set of questions to those who does not:

*I give different sets of assessment for these few groups of pupils. In my previous class, they get all the same papers. I tried the same before, giving them the same assessment, but the good ones turn up to finish early, and they get bored, probably because the worksheet was too easy for them. When I added a few more sentences for them to rearrange without teaching, they couldn't do it. They also need a bit of guidance. (liz/pv/08-16/L43-L49)*

*Chen's Story*

Chen likes giving her learners the opportunity to learn in other ways besides the conventional method of teaching and assessment. Chen's SBA practices seem to be more personalised in terms of her approach to guiding and facilitating her learners. This is also evident in the way she teaches reading, using colourful and decorative templates for her learners' writing activities, making them do a presentation of their work to the whole class and incorporating technology into her writing assessments. Chen also strongly believes that learners should not be tested until they are ready to be tested (e.g. she taught the content of the

Linus test before giving the test for her students to do), and in her view, the effort that the students are putting forth into the tasks they do should be considered enough pupils and for her to know about her learners' progress. In Chen's assessment practices, she continues to guide (prompting, giving ideas what to write), give feedback and monitor her learners while they are doing their tasks. The following excerpt shows an example of how Chen conducted her assessment activity:

*Extract 1:* (chen/co1/08-15/L543-L570)

T: OK, now you have described these four characters that you think are most interesting from this book. Now, what I want you to do is your favourite character. You are going to name my favourite character from the book is Jules, Jules' new teacher, Anastasia, Mr. Gelatti. You are going to say, I like Jules, Jules' new teacher, Anastasia or Mr. Gelatti, why, because? You can use all those words that you have learned earlier to describe all these characters. Can you do it now? *(The teacher looking at her watch).* At 8, I will be going to collect this, OK. *(The teacher distributes her template for the next tasks).* OK think of who you are going to choose? Choose one character. One character. *(The pupils are completing the tasks)*

*Chen walks around to look at how the pupils are doing. A pupil came to ask. Chen says,*

T: My favourite character is…? You can even write about the character that is not described earlier. Maybe you like 'Yuv', because you think she is pretty and you like Japanese. You can even write about 'mum'. You can even write about 'grandma', but the reasons are all up to you. You can use the words that I have provided there, that I have written down and we have discussed earlier. Or you can add on your own idea. You can add *sendiri (yourself).*

*While students are doing the task, the teacher pastes the previous work on the pupils' corner on the right-hand side of the class. Then she starts going around the class again. A pupil shows her work to her. The teacher takes a look. Chen explains;*

Why is she being a good teacher? *Kenapa dia cikgu yang bagus? (Why she is a good teacher?)* You think that she is a good teacher? Explain more, and then why do you think she is magical?

Later, after that:

*Extract 3:* (chen/co1/08-15/L651-L666)

T: OK, Fariz, you will be the first one to share your writing. Fariz, OK, stand up. Come on.

P: Teacher, apa itu clever? (what is clever?)

T: Pandai (clever)

Fariz: My favourite char…

T: Character

Fariz: …character from the book is Anastasia Olivetti. I like Anastasia Olivetti, because is very beautiful. She is famous author. She is humble and friendly. Anastasia Olivetti is very nice too.

T: Very nice one. Very good. OK, next one.

I conducted a post-classroom observation interview with Chen in order to understand the reasons behind her actions. The first thing I noticed about Chen's assessment

practice was her use of colourful and decorative templates, so I asked why she used these when her students did the writing activities:

So they feel that they are not doing assessment. The pupils don't feel threaten by the assessment term hanging over their head. *(chen/I1/07-15/L245-L250)*

Her action is also influenced by a belief about how the students will respond to the way she presents the activity:

So I tried to put activity in a way so that they are feeling like they are just doing like any other task that they do, that they have done. *(chen/I2/08-15/L82-L83)*

Another aspect that I noticed during the writing assessment was that Chen used teacher-talking time to give prompts or guiding questions. She believed that these would provide her learners with ideas about what to write in the assessment activity she had given to them. When I asked Chen why guiding the learners was so important to her, she said:

Because for most of the curriculum for SJK is under 'with guidance', it's the catch 'with guidance' at the description, so I would sometimes be more open to giving them guidance. In terms of giving some words they don't know how to spell, maybe words that they know in Malay their own language but they don't know how to translate it in English. *(chen/I2/08-15/L98-L102)*

Chen went on to say that the purpose of assessment is the following:

*Do not let the students feel the pressure of having the assessment on their head. So, you really need to really play the role. Basically, you can do it like I did, or maybe be more rigid, don't give them any guidance at all, but I would prefer to give them guidance along the way. They just write and answer on their own. (chen/I2/08-15/L89-L93)*

*Dennis Story*

Dennis used some language translation to get the meaning of his activity across during the explanation of his assessment. He conducts memorisation activity to get his students to remember the word list which they have learned. He makes use of a task-based approach to do his group work activities and to scaffold his students' understanding of the story before he conducts his real assessment. He uses games in preparing them for the reading comprehension and the assessment and throughout his lesson (e.g. his technique of introducing new words in a playful manner). The extract below shows how he did this as well as the instructions he gave his learners during the assessment:

*Extract: (den/co1/10-15/L626-L653)*

*T: OK, now I want you to keep the picture. OK, sit down everybody, now this one is an individual work. ok buat kerja sendiri tidak boleh meniru (do it yourself, and you can't copy) OK so, you can refer to the work earlier. OK, hello, you have a new friend (a new pupil walks into the class)*

*P: Hello!*

*A pupil: What's your name? (a pupil asking the new student for her name)*

*T: OK, you can sit there welcome. OK now, uh…duduk semula di tempat biasa jangan duduk dalam kumpulan (sit at your own place not in group) OK, you can go back to your seat. OK, now, so you look at the question. Read the following statements; if the statement is correct, you put a tick in the box provided; if the statement is false, you put a cross. Listen! OK dengar sini (listen) kamu tanda betul atau salah (mark true or false), you read all the statements there, for example number 1. The story begins early in the morning. Is it true or false.*

*P: False*

*T: The statement is false, because the story begins at midnight? Midnight-kan (right)? Not early in the morning. So it's wrong, so bagi tanda cross, pangkah. (make a cross) Alright, number 2–9 you do it yourself. If you don't understand, you ask me, OK? Escape means "melarikan diri" (then the students started to do their work; while [they were] doing so, Dennis said the following)*

*T: OK you answer all the questions. Siapkan besok hantar (finish it and hand in tomorrow) siapa yang sudah siap boleh hantar sekarang (those who have finish can hand in). If you have completed you can submit. OK, come on, we have 1 more minute (some students have completed and hand in their work to Dennis) so, the rest of you can send to me tomorrow.*

*A pupil: kalau tidak siap hantar kah? (if not finish can we hand in?)*

*T: No, tomorrow. The pictures you can keep. Yes, it's for you. Anyone else?*

In order to understand the reasons behind Dennis's assessment practices, I also conducted a post-classroom observation interview with him. During my observation with Dennis, he used worksheets as part of his teaching strategy and assessment. He said that it was important to re-evaluate his approaches in the classroom, and the worksheets helped him to do this. He thinks the pupils' results from the worksheet show him which part of his lessons need adjustments. He will re-do a whole lesson and the assessment if he finds out that his learners are not doing well in the task he gives:

When I gave them the worksheets it's actually more for me. It is actually more to really evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching. Yes, because I want to check whether uhm … what I did in the classroom really help the student understand the story, actually. So, I haven't really checked their worksheets but maybe once I found out that, OK, for example, my students could not able to answer as well as desired. I would re-evaluate my lesson. I would evaluate my approach. *(den/I2/10-15/L77-L83)*

To Dennis, the purpose of assessment is not only to verify learners' learning achievements but also to verify how the teachers are doing with their teaching. He said they would be able to make adjustments and modifications to their teaching and assessment approaches on the basis on what they found out.

*Summary*

The common belief about SBA and their relation to what is recommended in the curriculum.

1. *Assessment as a process for learning:* It is clear to them that assessment involves more than just testing. For

them, assessment is a natural process which takes into account not just the product but the whole process, such as the students' attitudes, the students' progress and also their effort in completing the tasks given to them.

2. *Teaching and assessment are inseparable:* Assessment provides an intrinsic motivation for the teachers to develop and improve on their own teaching. It tells them where and what to change in their approaches. It gives them the opportunity to make adjustments to teaching and assessment practices and to become familiar with other possible methods of teaching and assessment. Dennis, for example, says he cannot imagine teaching without assessment.

3. *Memorisation and repetition drills:* It was noticed, through the teachers' responses, that Liz and Dennis believe in the efficacy of this method to construct meanings of the words, phrases and sentences used in the lesson. Most activities assigned were related to drilling in vocabulary and sentences and to translating from English to Malay and vice versa. The teachers also mentioned that they used the memorising of vocabulary, phrases and sentences as well as repetition during reading and writing activities. They said that this was to enable the learners to recall the language already taught when they were assessed later.

4. *The integration of interactive learning:* In the effort to change what is done in the classroom with respect to assessment, the teachers in this study have tried to incorporate games, dynamics, role play and presentations (e.g. Dennis). This strategy is thought to encourage students' participation in the lesson, and participation means involvement. In contrast, Liz tries to avoid such activities as to her it will disrupt her lesson.

5. *Worksheet-based assessment:* The use of worksheets was one of the teachers' most popular choices of teaching strategies employed in the classrooms to ensure assessment had taken place. Worksheets provide an opportunity for the teachers to make links between what is learned and where to take the learners in the next level of the lesson. The teachers in this study assessed their students' learning as they worked in the classroom and did not just collect the worksheets at the end of their lessons. The teachers walked around the classroom and stopped at particular individuals and offered the guidance they needed. The teachers even used prompting strategies to give ideas and guidance in the students' writing tasks.

The teachers in this study showed that they had some knowledge and strong beliefs about the Malaysian primary school SBA, based on the evidence gathered in the preliminary interviews I conducted with them. These teachers also dealt with SBA in their own unique ways, with their own sets of beliefs, which might have been influenced by the number of years of their teaching experiences and the kind of training that they had with the SBA. For example, Liz had been teaching for twenty-four years and so she might be more accustomed to and influenced by the traditional method

of teaching-assessment in which pupils should listen and repeat after the teacher, memorize new language, group work should be avoided for fear that the activity would disrupt her lesson.

# 5. Discussions

In order for the researcher to take the findings to the participants, she outlined their thoughts in the form of dialogue bubbles (see Figure 1). For each participant, the study presented 5–6 themes according to what the study had identified with respect to their SBA practices. The reseacher made appointments with each of the three participants prior to the member-checking interview. Each interview is to last about 20–30 minutes. In analysing the member-checking interview, the researcher applied the same process as she did with her preliminary and post-observation classroom interviews (transcribing, rereading transcription and refer if the findings closely match with the themes the researcher had showed to the participants earlier for member checking). This provided the study with sufficient information of the teachers' practices with regards to formative assessment.

However, the strategies the study applied, as mentioned above, did not completely eliminate the effect of the researcher presence during classroom observations. As McDonough and McDonough [8] note, 'any form of observation is going to introduce distortion from normality'. Therefore, my presence inevitably had an influence on the participants and the setting under investigation. For example, during my preliminary observation of Liz, she tried valiantly to control the behaviour of her students in the classroom during the lesson, but after a while, it seemed that they simply could not sit and listen any longer. Some started to move around and make noises while Liz was conducting her lesson. A few walked towards the observer and started asking what she was doing at the back of the classroom, and they even looked at what the observer was writing. Nevertheless, employing Harvey's dialogic approach provided the study with the opportunity for further in-depth discussions about the teachers' justifications and reasons for their SBA practices [6].

In terms of transferability, the study only represents a small number of primary school English language teachers who claim to have the knowledge and pedagogical beliefs about SBA and their claim to be implementing SBA. Thus, this study may not be generalized in terms of the other population of primary school English language teachers in Malaysia. However, the findings may provide an in-depth investigation of three teachers with regards to their practices of SBA as stated in the previous discussion. According to Denscombe (2014) although each case maybe unique, it is also an example within broader group and, as a result, they suggest that transferability should not be immediately rejected. Thus, Guba & Lincoln (1985) suggested that it is the responsibility of the investigator or researcher that sufficient contextual information about the fieldwork is provided to enable such transfer [7]. According to Colorado

State University writing guide (1994) [1] transferability is a process performed by *readers* of research. Transferability is when the readers note the specifics of the research situation and compare them to the specifics of an environment or situation with which they are familiar. Therefore, if there are enough similarities between the two situations, the readers may be able to infer that the results of the research would be the same or similar in their own situation or "transfer" the results of a study to another context [2]. From the descriptions above the findings of the study may be transferable in situation that holds the same or similar context as the teachers investigated in the study and based for the following reason. Besides depending on the preliminary interviews, classroom observation and post classroom observations interview this study also generated other data from the participants. For example, the researcher spent a month in each school observing school activities, attended school meetings and interviewing other subject teachers, head teachers, assistant head teachers, head of English language panels and used the data to cross-check the teachers' practices of SBA investigated in the study. A month spent in each school had helped the researcher to understand the difficulties and reality behind teachers' implementation of the SBA [6].

Despite the limitations discussed above, this study makes a number of contributions. This project presented evidence why Assessment for Learning or formative assessment do not always turn out as expected. For example, (1) in terms of the age of the learners in responding to feedback, the need to align formative assessment with summative assessment, for policy makers to understand that introducing a new initiative not only means introducing a new set of guidebooks, the need for curriculum reformers to decide and prioritize which reforms are most important and the importance for curriculum reformers in recognizing and understanding the reasons for any potential mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their actualpractices; (2) the aim of formative assessment is to reveal learners' weaknesses and to help them progress through the feedback that the teacher gives – with the pupils responding to that feedback or information about their progress (Wiliam cited in Christodoulou, 2016) [3]. Considering the age of the learners (7-12 years old, young learners) it might be difficult for pupils to respond to the feedback given to them at this age. Thus, it is vital for educational policy makers within the Malaysian educational context to understand that introducing a new initiative not only means introducing a new set of syllabi, guidebooks or guidelines, but it also implies understanding what teachers think and understanding their behaviour with respect to the change as well as knowing their prior pedagogical beliefs about teaching and learning. Wedell (2009) also stated that one of the requirements for successful reform depends not on what is written but on how people interpret and act upon what is written [15].

Hence, teachers' pedagogical beliefs are considered to be a great influence on the teachers underlying practices [13]. Accordingly, based on this study teachers' conceptions of assessment is considered important because the teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, and curricula influence strongly how they teach and what students learn or achieve. 'Gaining access to the teachers' beliefs will give the opportunity to design relevant teaching material based on the teachers' needs. In this way, we will have the chance to achieve a change in classroom practices towards the effective implementation of formative assessment. This is important, as teachers' beliefs and practices influence the construction of their students' beliefs' [10].
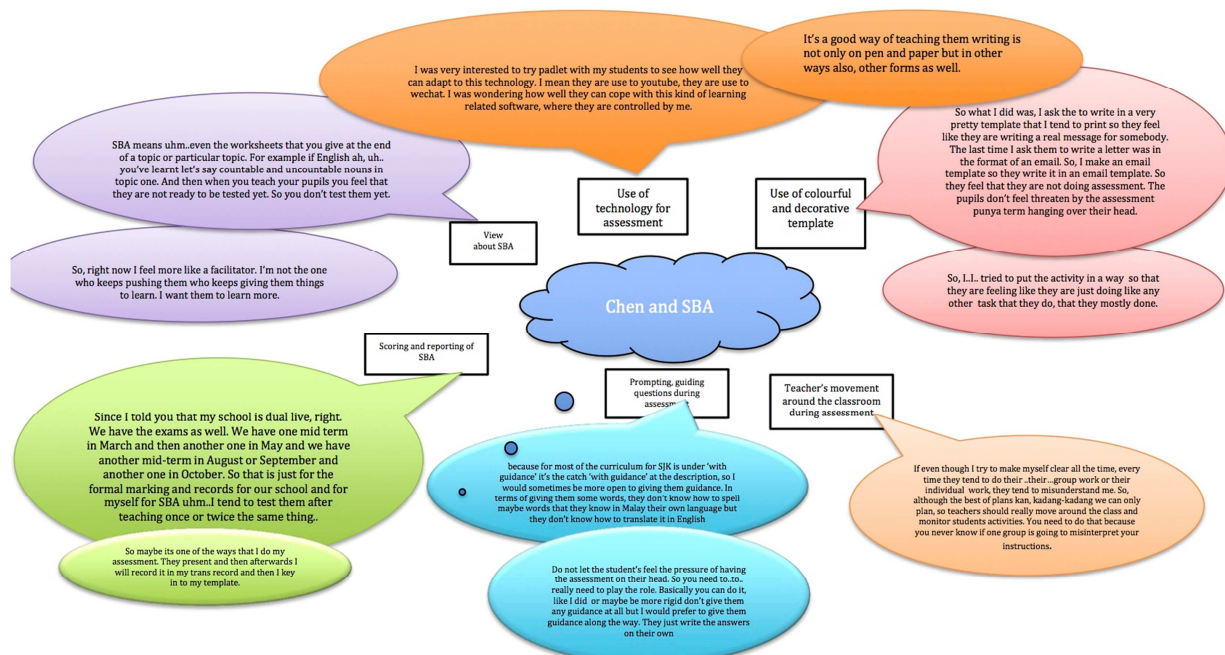
## Appendix



*Figure 1. Mapping of SBA practices for validation.*

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