

# Embracing the Shift: Heritage Language Teachers' Perspectives on Accepting Assessment for Learning as an Education Reform

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## Abstract

This study focuses on how Singaporean heritage language teachers comprehend and mediate their existing assessment practices in light of assessment for learning (AfL). Although AfL has been studied extensively in the Western classroom context, little is known about how teachers in South East Asian heritage language classrooms, such as Malay Language ones, perceive AfL. In the study, a survey regarding assessment practices of 121 heritage language teachers across 80 schools in Singapore was conducted. 20 in-depth interviews were carried out to investigate factors which affected teachers' acceptance of AfL. The study produces new knowledge regarding AfL in four areas: the impact of cultural disconnects on AfL practice in heritage language classrooms, the influence of teachers' early assessment habitus, the significance of moral responsibility as a motivational tool for educational reform and the realization that Singaporean educators deviate from centrally suggested initiatives when the desire to fulfil performance-oriented beliefs about learning is strong. There are several research implications. Firstly, enhancing and sustaining heritage language teachers' capacity of AfL knowledge is crucial to increase their embrace of AfL practice. Secondly, policymakers and school leaders need to be aware of teachers' own assessment habitus and the impact of habitus on teachers' current classroom assessment practices.

## Keywords

Assessment, Assessment for Learning, Assessment Reform, Teachers, Heritage Language

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction to Assessment for Learning (AfL) in Education

The Assessment Reform Group (ARG)<sup>1</sup> first defined AfL as follows:

Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group, 2002: pp. 2-3).

The ARG members also produced ten guiding principles for the use of AfL in practice and these principles situate AfL as intrinsic to teaching and learning.

In Singapore, the Malay language holds the status of a national language, symbolizing the heritage and culture of the Malay community, which is one of the country's key ethnic groups. Language education in Singapore is designed around the principle of bilingualism, where students are expected to be proficient in both English and their "mother tongue", which for Malay Singaporeans is the Malay Language (ML). ML education is mandatory for ethnic Malay students and is also available as an optional subject for students of other ethnicities. Schools offer a rigorous curriculum that ranges from basic literacy to more advanced topics in Malay literature and culture. This educational framework not only aims to preserve and cultivate linguistic skills but also to instil an understanding of Malay heritage and identity among younger generations. Overall, ML education in Singapore serves as a crucial tool for both cultural preservation and national identity.

Within the context of ML education in Singapore, the ARG's definition is certainly adopted. The ML (Secondary) syllabus states the following:

Assessment for Learning aims to monitor the progress of pupils continuously and interactively. In the process of learning, the teacher has an opportunity to give continuous quality feedback to the pupils. Hence, the pupils' learning abilities and needs are identified [*decide where the learners are in their learning*]. Subsequently, the teacher can plan suitable teaching activities [*how best to get there*] to increase student achievement [*where they need to go*] (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2011: p. 30).

However, "deciding where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there", has sometimes been misinterpreted by teachers to mean that they should frequently conduct "mini tests" to ascertain where the pupils are in their learning standards vis-à-vis the national set standards (Klenowski, 2009) whereas authentic AfL should really allude more towards "assessment as a support for learning" (Swaffield, 2011: p. 434). Klenowski in her position paper generated at the Third International Conference on AfL, men-

<sup>1</sup>ARG established in 1988 as the Assessment Policy Task Group of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and funded by the Nuffield Foundation (since 1997), is an independent group that looks into improving assessment in all of its forms (Gardner, 2006: p. 5).

tioned that teachers would conduct lessons to bridge gaps of knowledge in order to bring the students' scores closer to the desired high level of performance in national tests and exams, sacrificing real learning along the way (Klenowski, 2009). The conference held in New Zealand, was attended by 31 academics and consultants considered internationally as authorities in assessment. They met to advance the understanding and practices of AfL at all levels of education (Klenowski, 2009). The second definition of AfL was then crafted at this conference:

Assessment for Learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning (Klenowski, 2009: p. 264).

This definition of AfL no longer mentions an intended target of learning or deciding whether or not a student has achieved a particular learning objective which Harry Torrance and John Pryor (1998) term as convergent assessment (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). Instead it focuses on efforts to make current learning better by taking a divergent approach (Torrance & Pryor, 1998) which seeks to ascertain students' level of understanding. The definition also explicitly clarifies AfL as being part of the usual process of learning and teaching practice.

## 1.2. AfL in the Singapore Malay Language Classroom

AfL was introduced into Singapore's ML education syllabus in two phases. In 2008, AfL was first included as part of the primary school ML syllabus. It was subsumed under the heading of formative assessment and amongst the stated purposes of AfL was that it "aims to supervise the progress of students in a continuous and interactive manner" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2008: p. 26). Later in 2011 it was incorporated into the secondary school ML syllabus as one of two types of assessment (the other being assessment of learning) that ML teachers were expected to carry out. AfL was described as "formative in nature, carried out inside the classroom and continuously incorporated into teaching to ensure students can master learning objectives" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2011: p. 43). **Table 1** describes the development of AfL understanding within Singapore's ML syllabus from 2008 to 2015.

It is clear that that within the ML syllabus there are discrepancies and blurred areas with regards to the understanding of what AfL actually means. AfL was carried out for different purposes in the primary and secondary school syllabi. In the secondary syllabus AfL was concerned with teachers ensuring students' mastery of learning objectives while in primary schools the focus was teachers' supervision of students' progress. Another discrepancy was the outlining of different teaching principles in the 2008 and 2015 primary syllabus to achieve the same purpose of AfL. Overall for the past 8 years while the ML syllabus maintained that AfL is a vital component of effective teaching practice, the fundamental knowledge of what AfL entailed was still ambiguous.

**Table 1.** Development of AfL understandings in ML syllabus.

	2008	2011	2015
<b>Descriptors</b>	First introduction of AfL into ML primary school syllabus	First introduction of AfL into ML secondary school syllabus	Realigning AfL in revamped ML primary school syllabus
<b>Comparing AfL and formative assessment</b>	AfL is a type of formative assessment	AfL is formative in nature	AfL is equivalent to formative assessment
<b>Purpose of AfL</b>	To supervise the progress of students in a continuous and interactive manner	To ensure students can master learning objectives	To supervise the progress of students in a continuous and interactive manner
<b>Principles of AfL/Actions of teachers in line with AfL</b>	Six principles mentioned e.g. Give attention to the way students learn Be sensitive and encouraging Take note of students' motivation	Principles not mentioned explicitly but described through actions to be taken by teacher to integrate AfL e.g. Explain and share learning objectives and expectations with students	Principles not mentioned explicitly but described through abilities that teachers need to practise AfL in classrooms e.g. Know students profile and reasons why students make mistakes to be able to make decisions on the next action to be taken*

\*(Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2015).

### 1.3. Significance of Study

The rationale for this paper is to discuss what factors affect the acceptance of AfL and other educational reforms amongst heritage teachers like those who teach in Malay Language classrooms. Such classrooms are important learning environments which provide opportunities for students to delve deeper into their heritage language which are a conduit for them to form their cultural identities. If teachers are keen to accept educational reforms such as AfL, this positively impact the teaching, learning and assessment practices in heritage language classrooms.

Hallinger (2010) attributes cultural factors as reasons behind the obstacles to education reform in Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore. Based on surveys and interviews with educational policy-makers and scholars involved in education reform within these countries, Hallinger's (2010) study highlighted how the process of implementing "western educational innovations" has been anything but smooth in these Southeast Asian education systems. Cultural disconnects between the intentions of those who develop education innovations that have been globally accepted and the perspectives of the local practitioner implementing them have resulted in the stalling of certain reforms (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Pan, 2008). Curdt-Christiansen and Silver (2012) contends that there are cultural clashes between major educational reforms that emphasize independent thinking and Asian values, which emphasize respect for authority and conformity. Ho, Adie and Klenowski (2016) also argued the same in their study of the sociocultural context in Vietnamese higher education. Differences in AfL principles and Vietnamese culture were evident. While Vietnamese tradition emphasized harmony and "face saving" (not embarrassing others), these were barriers for the use of AfL strategies such as helping students be aware of their

current level of learning by being honest and critical (Ho et al., 2016).

Arimoto and colleagues highlighted a conclusion drawn from the International Symposium on Classroom Assessment and AfL (2014), which is that “assessment is a matter of culture” (Arimoto et al., 2015, p. 42). Unique Japanese pedagogical techniques such as “neriage” which means “kneading” or layering whole-class discussions are deemed as being aligned to AfL as they focus on learning. Although the Japanese ethic of valuing personal effort meant that students seek assistance from their peers less actively than their Western counterparts (Arimoto et al. 2015), moments of peer support still make a positive difference in the learning process for Japanese students. According to a recent study by Wicking (2020), Japanese students in higher learning institutions, believed that “peers are able to more or less help each other during assessments” (p. 186) with very little rivalry amongst them. A majority of these Japanese students engaged in assessment tasks with a sense of camaraderie and mutual support from their peers.

Within the Malay community the notion of having utmost respect for elders, being humble and soft-spoken are inherent. Western modernity and influences are often regarded with suspicion and thought to encroach on traditional Malay values. Hence when a reform such as AfL is introduced into the ML curriculum, ML teachers may struggle to understand practices such as allowing students to speak for themselves and decide their own learning objectives or promoting peer assessment. These are not processes which teachers and students are used to within the ML classroom culture. Hence while AfL may be better received and practised in other subjects, it is crucial to note that cultural processes are deeply embedded in learning contexts and a “one size fits all” approach to systemic reform simply cannot work (Chan & Law, 2011; Lynch, 2001; Newton, 2007).

## 2. Literature Review

Debates and controversies in the area of assessment often take centre stage in discussions on educational reform. The growth of knowledge economies globally has resulted in assessment assuming much greater importance in this century (Baird, Hopfenbeck, Newton, Stobart, & Steen-Utheim, 2014). The idea that the primary goal of assessment should be to encourage learning is swiftly spreading across global education systems. Policymakers in Singapore and many other countries (including Australia, United Kingdom, the United States) are now more aware of the need for assessment to go beyond testing (Baird et al., 2014). Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski and Colbert (2014) claim that after many decades of an assessment culture which focused on differentiating students’ test scores, learning-oriented assessment is now favoured in the US. In Singapore the education landscape is evolving into one that is not just performance-oriented but also places value on engaging students and even teachers in their own learning.

When a call for educational reform hits the headlines in Singapore it is nearly

always about issues surrounding assessment: high levels of stress faced by students to perform in school tests, the over-emphasis on national examinations, the proliferation of tutoring to supplement schools so students can be well prepared for assessment, and so on. Efforts to promote a more “student-centred, values-centric” education (Heng, 2015) with initiatives such as holistic assessment and AfL are part of Singapore’s recent education reforms in response to concerns raised about assessment. The Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI) holistic assessment initiative is an assessment reform which aims at supporting primary school (7 to 12 years old) pupils’ learning and development by balancing formative and summative assessments (PERI, 2009). Holistic and student-centric courses for secondary school (13 to 17 years old) pupils developed by 2017 will offer them more opportunities to pursue learning in their areas of interests and emphasize the application of thinking skills in authentic settings. Teachers are encouraged to engage in continual learning and take ownership of their growth as educators throughout their career.

In the literature on educational reform, it is clear that obstacles to change are inevitable (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007a; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Hallinger, 2010; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001). Among these are goals which are unclear and always shifting, poor communication of the vision, absence of leadership for the change and a lack of understanding, interest and resources (Evans, 1996; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Fullan, 2007b). In the case of Singapore, in spite of MOE’s efforts to encourage teachers to practise AfL perhaps it is not an easy task for students, teachers and school leaders to fully embrace this assessment reform given the strong tradition of examinations and results-focused learning culture that Singapore is known for.

The absence of an AfL culture in schools is an impediment to the development of assessment practices which do not merely focus on performance. Concerns closely related to teachers’ assessment literacy, on educational reforms such as AfL, which plays a crucial role in effective classroom assessment instruction need to be properly addressed (Lo & Leung, 2022). When getting good results becomes all that matters and teachers continue with assessment practices which ensure such results, students too become conditioned to expect learning to occur under such circumstances (Sadler, 2007). Unfortunately meaningful learning does not happen given such conditions. Research into testing programs shows that the increase in test scores over a period of time is most likely because teachers and pupils have become used to the tests and not due to increased learning (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003). I believe the situation is similar in Singapore’s ML education field. While the national average percentage ‘O’ level passes in ML for pupils in the Express stream has remained very high above 98% per cent every year, this can be attributed to how well ML teachers prepare their pupils to answer national summative test items correctly. While ML students are scoring high marks in the national examinations, fundamentally they might not have learnt much about the subject, other than how to answer exam questions

well. Teachers, who are comfortable with such good results, might not see the need to change their assessment practices to incorporate AfL, given that their current practices which are focused on rigorous repeated practices help students attain good ML exam results. Support for teachers to learn new assessment practices, such as AfL, is necessary to be successful in the context of professional development for new educational reforms (Shepard, 2019).

### 3. Methodology

Data collection instruments used in the research include an original online survey of teachers assessment practices, a classroom observation protocol and an interview schedule for examining teachers' assessment beliefs. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods across three stages of data collection and analysis. The first stage was a cross-sectional survey questionnaire electronically distributed for completion by ML teachers across secondary schools in Singapore. The main aim of the survey is to examine the extent of pragmatic knowledge regarding AfL amongst the ML teachers and to begin mapping out the field of ML assessment. The survey questionnaire design is largely adapted from Section A of the Staff Questionnaire administered by the team from the LHTL project (Pedder, 2006) which is a landmark research study into teachers' assessment practices. The second stage involved classroom observations of eight ML teachers to examine their AfL practices within a real classroom setting. The last stage consisted of in-depth interviews with 20 ML teachers, including the eight teachers.

The data reported in this paper is from the 20 in-depth interviews carried out to investigate factors which affected ML teachers' acceptance of AfL. A specific aim of the interviews was to discover the teachers' past experiences with assessment and degree to which they internalized AfL concepts and regard it as important. Further information with regards to distinct social and cultural factors within the teachers' context that affected their beliefs and practices of AfL were also discussed.

The interviews involved 20 ML teachers (including eight teachers observed) and were carried out face-to-face in a private room within the school where teachers felt safe and comfortable sharing their personal views. The teachers had varying years of experience in teaching, ranging from four to more than 20 years and taught in government or independent schools in Singapore. **Table 2** depicts the main questions for the interview.

During the research, with consent from the teachers' involved, interviews were all audio-recorded. Key data was summarized immediately following the interview. All interview transcripts were completed within two weeks of each interview. Feedback was solicited from all interviewees once the interview transcript was drafted. None of the teachers interviewed requested for revisions to be made to their interview transcripts. All the interview responses were analyzed using NVivo to accurately reflect an overall perspective of the responses through

**Table 2.** Main questions for interview.

No.	Interview questions
1	Describe any instances in your own schooling experience where you felt that assessment practices were beneficial to your learning.
2	How would you know if students in your classroom were learning? What does learning look like in your classroom?
3	Describe what assessment for learning means to you.
4	How did you know about assessment for learning? Is assessment for learning discussed or practised amongst teachers in your school?
5	What are the challenges (if any) that you feel teachers in your school face when implementing AfL? What is formative assessment?
6	Is formative assessment the same as assessment for learning? If yes, how are they the same? If not, how are they different?
7	Is assessment for learning important? Why or why not?

the coding process. After the coding was completed, main nodes or themes that emerged and the most frequent descriptor within each theme were explored. Although the analysis of interview data was tedious process, the teachers' inputs provided strong evidence for the transferability of interpretations and conclusions drawn from the research.

#### 4. Findings from Interviews

Utilizing NVivo, a set of 11 main nodes, 33 sub nodes and 100 descriptors that represent the responses from the 20 teachers interviewed were coded. **Table 3** depicts the 11 main nodes or themes arising from the coding and the most frequent descriptor within each theme.

Themes 1 to 5 are examined in greater detail as more than half of the respondents used similar descriptors. Themes 6 to 10 are deliberated briefly at the end of this section.

##### 4.1. Importance of AfL

19 out of 20 teachers interviewed agreed that AfL is important. However, most of the reasons given tended to be more teacher-centered and focused on student performance:

I believe it is important because more often than not we feel frustrated when students are not performing at the level that we expect only to find that oh...we didn't get enough data during the process of learning. (Aisha)

Other teachers cited pragmatic reasons such as "utilizing AfL as an indicator of whether lesson objectives are met" (Norman) and "not wanting to carry on with lessons should there be mistakes in students' understanding that go uncorrected" (Hanim). Nevertheless, as mentioned, most of the reasons tended to be



**Table 3.** Main themes arising from coding of interviews.

No.	Themes arising from coding	Most frequent descriptor	Number of teachers using descriptor
1	Importance of AfL	AfL is important	19
2	Challenges when implementing AfL	Lack of time	13
3	Peer and leadership support for AfL	Peer sharing sessions	11
4	<i>Habitus</i>	Early assessment <i>habitus</i> translates to current assessment practice	11
5	Factors affecting acceptance of initiative	Initiative benefits students	11
6	Perception of AfL	Form of feedback for adjusting pedagogy	10
7	Origin of AfL knowledge	National Institute of Education	10
8	Understandings of formative assessment	FA is the same as AfL	10
9	Concept of learning	Ability to answer questions	8
10	Important element in classroom learning	Building rapport with students	6

because it was valuable for the teacher. A few respondents, like Ismail, did consider the benefit of AfL for students' learning:

...I write comments like *do consider this...* to me these sort of comments are more meaningful in AfL rather than giving grades or saying they made a lot of mistakes. What do they learn? Constructive feedback is important. To me this [AfL] is important. (Ismail)

Ainul, was the only teacher reluctant to state that AfL was important. Despite acknowledging the value of AfL, she was convinced that constant practice and drilling was still the best method of teaching and assessing students. In other words, AfL was important but not as important as tests and exams for checking pupils' understanding. Ainul was doubtful that her students would be able to participate meaningfully in AfL:

I mean...you can conduct AfL, gather feedback and all that...but the students can just sit down beside their friends and copy what they wrote! And then as teachers we assume that the kid understands. So I think back to basics, paper and pen is still the best way to show if that person understands. (Ainul)

#### 4.2. Issues with Time, Lack of Peer Support and Absent Leadership

13 out of the 20 teachers interviewed disclosed that issues with time management prevented them from properly putting AfL into practice. Teachers like Khalidah mentioned that heavy administrative duties, the rush to complete the syllabus and keep to the scheduled scheme of work affected the extent of her AfL practice as these took precedence in the classroom. Another teacher, Norlin, considered the processes in AfL to be time consuming. Assessing the learning that happens, and then taking into consideration the feedback received to improve the next learning session was tedious to Norlin, especially when there were

other duties that teachers had to carry out. Wahid and Izrai also shared similar concerns:

I think time is a factor... And to carry out peer assessment and all that in class, that takes up time! (Wahid)

Time is the main factor. Because you want to finish your syllabus before exams and you need to rush through certain things... So that is the challenge of implementing AfL... (Izrai)

Two teachers revealed that they were more comfortable enacting AfL strategies for their lower secondary classes. Mastura mentioned that for her lower secondary classes, who were not preparing for any major national examinations, she made the time to conduct peer assessment and gave them opportunities to decide some of their learning objectives. Norman was also more flexible with his assessment strategies for his lower secondary students. It is only when these students are at upper secondary and facing the national examinations that he switches to more performance-oriented assessment strategies such as regular tests and drilling of composition and comprehension exercises.

Another factor that some teachers saw as a challenge to AfL implementation was the profile of their ML students. This included the students' lack of fluency in Malay Language itself, making it complicated when teachers attempt to give more feedback in the form of comments:

A lot of my students are not very good in ML. So what makes AfL difficult is when they do not understand the comments I am writing for them. For example they do a composition for me and I give feedback in the form of comments. They just keep asking me, "Teacher, what do you mean by this?" They just want to know, is it good or not good? So when we write long comments, they do not understand! (Erfa)

Erfa also elaborated that some of her students disliked peer assessment because they felt that their friends were being negative towards them. When they received criticism on their work these students became upset and did not wish to participate anymore in the activity.

11 teachers interviewed mentioned that having supportive colleagues who shared their AfL practices was an important element to inculcating AfL in their classrooms. Two teachers belonging to the same school spoke of how they participated in discussions regarding AfL knowledge with their peers:

Because one topic can be taught by many teachers, so amongst us we discuss and in the lesson plan the teachers are supposed to put into place how they include AfL. (Aisha, Green Vista School)

So for AfL, there is sharing [sessions] with different people. We brainstorm with one another...what are the structures we know, then after that we look through our lesson plan, which parts we need to focus on and we share lesson plan exemplars with teachers within and across department. (Azimah, Green Vista School)

One subject head from a particular school who used to carry out in-house AfL workshops for her teachers reminisced about how important it was to have leadership support in order for AfL to gain momentum amongst teachers. Under a new school leadership, this particular subject head felt that the direction was no longer the same with regards to developing teachers' capacity in AfL:

Ever since the new principal arrived this year, our professional learning committee (PLC) has taken a different direction. If it was last year, we can see that with every teaching activity that they shared, they could highlight the AfL aspect of it. Teachers can share resources, so last year I saw a lot of AfL. But this year, I have yet to see anything much because there has not been much professional sharing [sessions]. (Erfa)

Erfa's opinion regarding the important role of school leaders in ensuring an initiative like AfL thrives concurs with 7 other interview respondents. Four of these respondents were subject heads like Erfa and all of them spoke about the influence that school leaders had in spearheading change. School leaders need to be explicit in emphasizing change and showing that they were capable of directing the way forward:

It actually starts from school leaders. I mean, whatever the Ministry says and whatever initiatives come, if the school leaders do not emphasize it, then the teachers will not be bothered too. Teachers have a lot of things to do. So if leaders do not insist that we have to do it, then teachers will just continue with their own style of teaching. (Erfa, Head of ML department)

To me, personally, the human factor is important. Is there a capable person helming this process? Is there someone capable helming and leading the charge for AfL? Is there a proper structure? For one, we need a capable person. (Ismail, Subject Head ML)

Norlin explained that without leadership support, carrying out an initiative like AfL was inconsequential, as it would not be aligned to the school system:

We move based on the system of the school. If the school is headed in that direction, then of course, we as teachers can accept the change. But if the school assumes that a particular initiative is minor and does not want to continue or head towards that direction, then even if we carry it out as a teacher, it becomes meaningless. So with regards to initiatives, we should move as a school, as a system. It depends whether or not school leaders can support the change (Norlin, Subject Head ML)

Another HOD, Ruby, reported that in her role as a department leader, she sometimes needed to go against the decisions of school leadership in determining which initiatives were helpful for her teachers who were already overloaded with work. Ruby, affirmed that she was given the flexibility to shape the ML department's scheme of work and not rush to finish the curriculum. The school leaders gave her and the ML teachers the freedom to shape their own school-based

ML curriculum and rarely intervened with the department's choice of syllabus content, especially since the ML results for national examinations are always exceedingly good.

### 4.3. Impact of Teachers' Early Assessment Experiences

Another major theme that arose from the interviews was based on a question that required the teachers to reflect on their own schooling experiences. Teachers were asked to reveal any assessment practices that they felt were beneficial to their own learning as students. 11 teachers disclosed that as students, they valued early assessment practices which were AfL-oriented. The other nine teachers opened up about being comfortable with more performance-oriented classroom assessment practices. 11 of the teachers agreed that their early assessment experiences translates into their current teaching practice. This included both sets of teachers who were AfL-oriented or performance-oriented. Ismail and Mariam who had early assessment experiences that were AfL-oriented both confirmed that they translated these experiences into their current teaching practice:

This particular practice [that my English teacher carried out], peer assessment and focusing on the process of learning, yes it is really important to me personally. Because when I look at the situation now, especially my students now, I really wish to change their way of thinking when approaching an essay. (Ismail)

The things that my teacher wrote in their comments, it mattered to us. Sometimes I looked forward to what my teacher wrote to see how my writing was compared to my previous writing so that helped me to see whether I am improving or not. So for my students, writing the comments on their composition is important to me because I feel that is how I benefitted too. (Mariam)

Similarly, teachers who had early assessment experiences that was more performance-oriented were prone to carrying out such practices in their current teaching. Wahid vividly remembered comparing his performance to his friends' and trying to get as many marks as he could to compete with them:

I asked myself how come my friend always gets more marks for composition than me? I tried my best but I could not get such high marks so I said to my friends, can I borrow your composition? And I read it and figured out oh so this is how you get high marks. And now, maybe subconsciously I also use this technique. I take the good compositions from my students and I photocopy it. I distribute it to other students so that they can read it. You know they say, in order to get an A you must know what an A looks like! (Wahid)

Elfi recounted positively the impact of repeated writing exercises which his own teacher carried out in class. He remained convinced that rote learning was also the best method for his students to acquire knowledge. Elfi termed his

classroom learning strategy as “tweaked rote learning”. Realising the negative undertones of rote learning, Elfi described how he carried out “modular exercises” which involved his students doing different “modules” on the same section of the syllabus. Elfi was convinced that by repeatedly engaging his students with the same content, they would learn better.

A majority of teachers who felt performance-oriented assessment practices were good for them as students, referred to the use of traditional tests and exams. Some of these teachers felt that undergoing such forms of assessment was constructive for them as students because it gave them the confidence and motivation when they did well:

I felt the main exams were beneficial to me. Because that is the time when we studied and then we know we have understood whatever is being taught. So if I get good results means I have understood what is being taught. That means I know what is going on in school (Izrai)

Izrai revealed that he continues to believe in the benefits of rigorous tests and exams in his current teaching practice as it was a way for him to “see if students were ready to learn”. Kayli concurred with Izrai and insisted that exams were good for students regardless of how they performed:

Because I’m the kind of person who will turn something negative into a positive so even with bad results, I think it will still be all right! (Kayli)

#### **4.4. A Sense of Moral Responsibility**

11 teachers admitted that if adopting a reform would be advantageous to their students, then they would be supportive of the said reform. Teachers like Azimah and Norman all had their students’ interests at heart when describing what motivates them to embrace an initiative:

For me to embrace an initiative, firstly...what is the purpose of it? If I know the purpose is to help my students by using it, then yes. (Azimah)

Norman and Khalidah took the cue from their students’ level of interest in a particular initiative. If students positively accepted the initiative introduced, teachers felt motivated to continue with the change:

So for me I thrive on students’ interest, because my personal belief is the more you are interested in something, the more you are willing to do it. (Norman)

For example with regards to the use of interactive devices for learning, when I first tried it out in class, the students really liked it and then some of them whispered to me, “Teacher, I think we should have more of this because I think I understand more.” So I decided to take that up. (Khalidah)

One teacher, Izrai, said that despite wanting the best for his students by trying out some initiatives, he still felt that his “hands were tied” such that he could not do certain things successfully. Izrai also disclosed that he just had too much ad-

ministrative work to complete alongside attempting to put new initiatives in place. Other respondents also shared his concern. They felt that support from school leadership was a necessary factor to compel teachers to accept an initiative. Changes in school leadership sometimes meant that teachers had to re-channel their efforts from one initiative to another, which can be frustrating for teachers.

The teachers also affirmed that it was imperative to be fully conversant with an initiative, as it would imbue them with the confidence to execute the initiative in their classrooms:

I must be comfortable with the initiative. If I am blur, how can I teach the kids? For example, with differentiated instruction, I am not comfortable with it but somehow I need still need to find a way to do it. But formative assessment, I am comfortable and I want to do it. I see the benefits for the students. (Azimah)

I think some teachers, especially the new ones, are not sure what AfL is about. I think they think of AfL as something on top of what they already have on their plate. So they have to build their knowledge and understand the rationale of AfL. (Norazah)

Other than the five major themes discussed above, there were several other minor themes raised by the teachers during the interviews. One of these themes is associated with a sociocultural practice unique to the ML classroom. Teachers interviewed recognized that ML students' attitudes were different in ML classes compared to other subjects. They felt that students were more positive and respectful during ML lessons and one teacher attributed this to the cultural context of ML learning in schools:

I think because the students *salam* (a form of greeting where the hand is kissed as a sign of respect to an elder) us, it is a culture that reminds our students that we as Malays, have a religion and maybe this reminder makes them respect the Malay teachers more. So they may be noisy in class, but they are never rude. Because being rude crosses the line. I hear from other subject teachers that in other subjects, ML students could be really rude to their teachers. Perhaps for us [in the ML department], we emphasize on values. (Zakiah)

## 5. Discussion

### Sociocultural Factors Affecting the Acceptance of Educational Reform

The sociocultural perspective views assessment as a cultural activity (Willis, Adie & Klenowski, 2013). Teachers and learners mediate meaning and identity by engaging in the activity with the social, cultural and historical experiences they bring. Based on this perspective, assessment reforms such as AfL are understood and integrated within the social, cultural and historical context of schools (Har-

greaves et al., 2001).

The findings have revealed that ML teachers consider social support from fellow colleagues to be an important factor that would encourage them to practise AfL in classrooms. Teachers feel constrained when there is a lack of peer discussion and collaboration on AfL. Having fellow colleagues who also consistently put AfL into practice in their classrooms eased the acceptance of AfL by teachers as students also became used to the strategies (Hargreaves, 2013). For instance, Hanim found being one of maybe a handful of teachers in her school who practised AfL to be demotivating as her students resisted the strategies she attempted to put in place. AfL was not recognised as an important practice amongst teachers or students in Hanim's school. In essence, they did not regard AfL as capital, or an important competency that they stood to gain from participation in it. Hence it became challenging for Hanim to sustain her AfL practice as she did not have colleagues with whom she could work together to improve her assessment strategies. As Hargreaves (2013) and Hermansen (2015) pointed out, strong teacher collaboration is necessary for sustained improvements in teaching and learning with AfL practice. Working together with colleagues is indeed important to help teachers change their practice and learn the skills necessary for implementing AfL strategies effectively (James et al., 2007).

Another social constraint that stood in the way of widespread AfL practice amongst ML teachers in the study was the quality of support for AfL that they received from school leaders. Interviews with teachers such as Erfa, Ismail, Norlin and Ruby affirmed that school leaders had an important role in spearheading assessment reform. Teachers expressed the importance of leaders being explicit in emphasizing change and directing the way forward. Such a view was corroborated by Evans (1996), Fullan & Miles (1992) and Fullan (2007a) who pointed out that goals which are unclear and always shifting, poor communication of the vision and the absence of leadership for change are major impediments for enacting reform in schools. This finding is in line with Clive (2000) who stressed that for leadership to be effective in improving student learning, it matters what practices principals focus on. Within the research, ML teachers affirmed the importance of having leadership support in order for AfL to gain momentum amongst teachers. The direction taken with regards to developing teachers' capacity in AfL changed under the leadership of different principals.

The findings have revealed some interesting insights regarding the impact of a cultural disconnect on AfL practice in second language classrooms. Based on the analyses of classroom observation transcripts and interviews, ML students' lack of fluency in the language made it complicated for teachers to practise AfL strategies such as giving feedback in the form of comments and encouraging peer assessment. Students simply did not have enough ML vocabulary to enact these strategies effectively. This finding is in agreement with Carnoy and Rhoten (2002) and Pan (2008) who state that the cultural disconnect between the intentions of those who develop global education innovations and the perspectives of

the local practitioner implementing them can result in the stalling of certain reforms. It also concurs with [Ho et al., \(2016\)](#) and [Arimoto et al., \(2015\)](#) that perspectives on classroom learning and assessment are subject to the cultural values subscribed in a particular context. Arimoto and colleagues highlighted a conclusion drawn from the International Symposium on Classroom Assessment and AfL (2014), which is that “assessment is a matter of culture” ([Arimoto et al., 2015: p. 42](#)). Unique Japanese pedagogical techniques such as “neriage” which means “kneading” or layering whole-class discussions are deemed as being aligned to AfL as they focus on learning. However the Japanese ethic of valuing personal effort also meant that Japanese students seek assistance from their peers less actively than their Western counterparts. Ho and colleagues, within the context of Vietnamese higher education, discussed the same tension. The writers assert that in Vietnam, where values such as respect for harmony and hierarchy are highly valued, the idea of AfL, which changes the power relationship between teachers and learners, may be problematic ([Ho et al., 2016](#)).

This research proposes a new understanding concerning the influence of cultural values in the classroom on AfL implementation. Teachers need to mediate their classroom cultural values with AfL strategies in order to fully embrace AfL. In the case of ML education, the challenge lies not only in the lack of current classroom vocabulary associated with AfL but also in the cultural clashes between AfL strategies and the learning culture within ML classrooms. In order to enact AfL strategies such as active questioning and peer assessment in classrooms, students need to be vocal, critical and unafraid to challenge the opinions of authoritative figures. These are not character traits inherent in the Malay culture which tends to promote humility, being soft-spoken and respecting elders. As argued by [Ho et al., \(2016\)](#) there are cultural clashes between Western-developed educational reforms that emphasize independent thinking and Asian cultural values that emphasize respect for authority and conformity.

Teachers need to be aware of this cultural disconnect and mitigate the situation by being consistent and persistent with their AfL practices in order to enculturalise AfL into their classrooms. Teachers’ constant use of ML terms to convey AfL strategies will act as semiotic mediators that produce qualitative transformations in both the teachers themselves and the milieu in which they are situated ([Holland et al., 1998](#)). Indeed, as mentioned by [Lynch \(2001\)](#) a “one size fits all” approach to systemic reform simply cannot work when cultural processes are so deeply embedded in learning contexts. [Chan and Law’s \(2011\)](#) notion of the “cultural space” within which education reforms evolve is also relevant here. The “cultural space” of ML teaching and learning is embedded with traditional values that have to be pragmatically regarded when moderating an initiative such as AfL. It is still possible for ML students to be critical yet respectful when voicing out their opinions. Teachers need to explicitly include such practices in the “cultural space” of the ML classroom, creating opportunities for students to familiarize themselves with.



The findings have also unveiled new knowledge regarding the impact of teachers' early assessment experiences on their current teaching practice. ML teachers tend to translate assessment practices that were meaningful for them as students into their prevailing classroom assessment pedagogy. For ML teachers, their assessment experiences have been shaped by approximately 16 years of schooling (from primary school to university) where they have been enculturated into what constitutes as assessment within their learning context. In the case of Aisha, from Green Vista Secondary, despite being in a school environment where conditions for assessment reform are fulfilled, her early assessment experiences, which consisted of "pen and paper tests", affected the extent of her belief and practice of AfL. Aisha's colleague, Azimah, had early assessment experiences which were impacted positively by an understanding teacher who was sensitive to his students' needs. In contrast to Aisha, Azimah was concerned with giving students the right type of assessment support. Despite being in the same school with the same leadership that supports assessment reform, the differences in Azimah's and Aisha's past assessment experiences and personal beliefs about learning and assessment reveal that such historical factors greatly affect teachers' AfL profiles.

In the study, 11 teachers disclosed that they experienced meaningful AfL-oriented assessment practices while the other nine felt that their assessment experiences were shaped by more performance-oriented assessment strategies. Out of the first group of 11 teachers, eight continued to practise similar AfL strategies in their current classroom assessment pedagogy. The reconstitution of their early assessment experiences into their current assessment practices as teachers was dependent on various factors within the ML teachers' context such as support from school leadership and peers, and opportunities available to increase their knowledge of AfL.

Contrary to the slightly dismal outlook on the nature of the "ingrained collective pedagogical experiences" of teachers in Singapore, there are ML teachers with constructive assessment experiences. Hogan (2011) argued that the impact of teachers' educational experiences together with the complex multimodal structure of instructional governance in Singapore, make it unlikely for changes in instructional practices to be significant or sustainable. The findings from this research disagree and ML teachers such as Ismail and Mariam, who were more driven by AfL-oriented strategies as students and successfully translated their positive AfL experiences into current teaching practices are wonderful examples of teachers who have reformed their assessment practices well. It can be argued that any effort to change the form and purpose of classroom assessment to make it more central to the learning process must acknowledge the influence of the underlying assumptions and beliefs that teachers themselves have about learning. Beyond acknowledging teachers' assumptions about learning, it is also imperative to accept and recognize teachers' early assessment habitus for successful AfL implementation.

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## 6. Recommendations

### Motivating Factors for Educational Reform

Efforts to promote a more “student-centred, values-centric” education (Heng, 2015) with initiatives such as AfL are part of Singapore’s recent education reforms in response to concerns raised about assessment. Given the sociocultural constraints discussed earlier, there are three key factors that can motivate teachers to take on an educational reform like AfL: moral responsibility, leadership support and capacity building.

Fullan (2006) asserted the importance of moral purpose as a potential motivator for reform. This view is consistent with the findings from the research. A majority of the ML teachers interviewed divulged that the strongest motivation for them to take on a reform was the benefit that ML students stood to gain from a change in the classroom teaching and learning practice. However, the findings revealed that this motivation goes beyond just having a moral purpose for teaching. ML teachers are driven by a sense of moral responsibility.

The research suggests that moral responsibility is a more powerful motivation than moral purpose for educational reform that appeals to teachers’ sense of duty towards their students. Similar to the sense of ethical leadership that Duignan (2007) describes, moral responsibility amongst teachers drives them to make ethical decisions on which reform to enact based on their personal integrity, credibility and sense of duty as educators. While possessing a moral purpose is an important personal motivation, having a sense of moral responsibility implies being committed to a cause external to oneself. Such commitment to pupil’s learning is essential for building motivation (Stobart, 2006). Without the necessary motivation for teachers to put in the effort to change, improvement to practice is impossible (Fullan, 2006).

Another aspect of teachers’ social milieu that has proven to be very impactful on their acceptance of educational reform is school leadership (Duignan, 2007; MacBeath et al., 2009; Sergiovanni, 1984; Starratt, 2004). This view is consistent with the research. The support of school leaders, enabled teachers to increase their knowledge and practice of AfL. For an educational reform like AfL to be successful, school leaders need to make it explicitly clear that learning is not just about scoring good grades and continually assure teachers that they need not worry about their teaching performance being tied to students’ grades. This focus on learning is an important guiding principle in leadership for learning practice (MacBeath et al., 2009). It relieves teachers from feeling stressed about students’ results and instead encouraged her to focus on improving teaching and assessment techniques for the sake of students’ learning. Indeed, teachers and students will put in much more effort than expected when motivated by leaders who build the capacity of their teachers and value their contribution (Sergiovanni, 1984). The moral commitment shown by Azimah’s vice principal was an essential element of ethical leadership (Starratt, 2004). Her vice principal did not only have a sound understanding of AfL, but also involved the whole school

community in focusing on the learning process. Other case study teachers did not articulate such clear visions of assessment reform in their schools. Some teachers interviewed even mentioned that their schools' focus with regards to reform shifted under the leadership of different principals. This resulted in teachers having minimal knowledge of AfL as it was "phased" out when the next initiative came. Even experienced teachers like Wahid became disinterested and jaded with the many initiatives he had to cope with coupled with the lack of proper support to help him enact changes in his practice. Indeed, for leadership to be effective in improving student learning it matters what practices principals and other school leaders focus on.

ML teachers who were interviewed revealed that they did not get many opportunities to attend training sessions on AfL when it was initially introduced in 2011. Many of them depended on fellow colleagues who had some knowledge or interest in AfL. This was not encouraging for teachers who already felt burdened by the slew of initiatives that teachers were expected to put into place. While teachers were interested to learn more about the assessment reform, there needed to be a more strategic approach taken to build their capacity at the initial stages of reform implementation. Such cases corroborate with [Ratnam-Lim and Tan's \(2015\)](#) findings that the mindsets of teachers in Singapore were resistant to change and while they believed that Holistic Assessment was important, they were not equipped with the skills needed to enact AfL strategies such as providing students with effective feedback. The lack of concentrated effort towards building teachers' capacity for change is indeed a major hindrance to reform ([Fullan, 2006](#); [Hallinger, 2010](#)).

Within this study, capacity building issues plague not only teachers, but students as well. ML students' lack of technical knowledge regarding AfL as an assessment reform affected the extent of AfL practice in classrooms. Students were not keen to participate in peer assessment activities because they were not used to the method and could not break away from their performance-oriented assessment habits. In schools where there was a lack of teachers, who were practising AfL, such AfL strategies when practiced only in ML classrooms seemed foreign to students. These issues inhibit sustainable reform which [Nguyen and Walker \(2016\)](#) argue is only possible when both teachers and students build the capacity to develop skills needed for the innovation.

## 7. Conclusion

Within the wider education context in Singapore, there is a momentum building towards the establishment of a student-centric, values driven education. MOE is moving towards an education system that is not merely performance-oriented but also places value on engaging students in their own learning ([Heng, 2015](#)).

One implication of the research is that policymakers and school leaders need to consider the impact of teachers' assessment experiences on their current assessment practices. Other than introducing AfL and providing resources to sup-

port teachers' practices, policymakers need to consider how these teachers are successful products of a Singaporean education system that was more performance-oriented then. A majority of these teachers had assessment experiences that were more performance-oriented. Policymakers need to strategize efforts around acknowledging these varied assessment experiences but ultimately convincing teachers that their students who learn in an education context that is attuned to more holistic assessment practices, stand to benefit from assessment for learning.

Policymakers also need to focus on the role of school leaders in advancing AfL. The findings suggest that although AfL in ML was rolled out by MOE to all secondary schools in 2011, and even before that for other subjects, the rigour with which it is being practised differs from school to school, with teachers citing that they took the cue from school leaders when it comes to implementing such initiatives. The findings also indicate that the intensity of AfL reform largely depended on how invested school leaders were in the reform, regardless of how heavily MOE emphasized it. Given the impact of performance-oriented practices on the history of the education system in Singapore (Dimmock et al., 2013; Tan, 2011a, 2011b), MOE should provide continued and focused support to school leaders which in turn would help clarify the basic AfL principles and strategies. MOE's decision to remove the banding of secondary schools by academic results (Heng, 2012), remove mid-year examinations (Ang, 2022) and full subject-based banding (Ministry of Education, 2023) are steps in the right direction as it all deemphasizes the focus on results and examinations. Regular consultations with school leaders on aspects of AfL implementation that teachers need help with will build on the motivation for change and encourage more school-wide assessment reforms.

The difficulties that teachers face with regards to accepting AfL as an education reform need to be acknowledged by policymakers and school leaders. ML teachers raised several common challenges they faced when implementing AfL such as the lack of time for gaining more knowledge about AfL, the resistance from students and the pressure to meet set work targets by the department. School leaders need to lead by example and assure teachers that they can focus on students' learning processes instead of focusing on how their students would perform in national examinations. School leaders should continuously remind and reassure their teachers that results are not the main emphasis of the teaching and learning that happens in school and make it mandatory for teachers to convey to students the bigger vision of education which is one of lifelong learning and continuous development.

Another implication of the research findings is the importance of peer support to advance teachers' AfL knowledge. The acceptance of AfL practice amongst teachers and students is crucial for successful assessment reform. Teachers thrive in an environment where there are plenty of opportunities for them to discuss and improve on AfL strategies within their school settings. When there is a lack

of peer support amongst teachers, it is difficult to convince students that AfL is necessary and good. In order to increase AfL practice among teachers, school leaders need to provide opportunities and platforms for teachers to share knowledge with peers within their working environment.

The influence of cultural values within the classroom on AfL implementation is an area of research that can be explored further, not just within the field of ML education, but in the wider Asian classroom settings. Possible cultural clashes between Asian values and certain AfL principles can be further explored. Methods to reconcile and mediate these cultural disconnects should be investigated further. The enculturation of AfL into Asian classroom settings is an important field that needs to be further explored. Expanding further research to include teachers from Malaysia or Brunei, who may be teaching other heritage languages in different sociocultural classroom settings could also shed light into the impact of the contextual social and historical factors on the culture of heritage language teaching.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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