

# THE IMPACT OF MALAY LANGUAGE TEACHERS' EARLY ASSESSMENT HABITUS ON CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

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## Abstract

The context of Malay Language (ML) teaching and learning in Singapore is laden with culture, social etiquette and history. Although the main working language is English, ML is constitutionalized as Singapore's national language. ML teachers are specially addressed by everyone in the school, with the title "*Cikgu*" attached. It is within this unique classroom context that my investigation is focused. This research is driven by a deep concern about what effective learning looks like in an ML classroom, what teaching practices support this and what can be done to help ML teachers master these practices so that improvements associated with the latest assessment reform in ML education can spread and be sustained. This reform is Assessment for Learning (AfL) which was introduced into the ML (Secondary) syllabus in 2011. Other than conducting surveys and classroom observations, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with selected teachers. The interviews aimed to discover the teachers' *habitus* and degree to which they internalized AfL concepts and regarded it as important. The study produces an area of new knowledge regarding AfL: the influence of teachers' early assessment *habitus* on their current assessment practice. One research implication is the awareness that ML teachers, policymakers and school leaders need to have of teachers' own assessment *habitus* and the impact of *habitus* on teachers' current classroom assessment practices.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Assessment for Learning, *habitus*, Malay Language, Education

## Introduction

Assessment for Learning (AfL) was introduced into Singapore's Malay Language (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: 26). Later in 2011 it was incorporated into the secondary school ML syllabus as one of two types of assessments (the other being the 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: 43).

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 to take ownership of their growth as educators throughout their career.

When the Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore, launched the "Teach Less, Learn More" (TLLM) initiative in 2005, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the Minister of Education then, in reply to questions in Parliament about the initiative, said:

Our basic approach, as we go forward, is to go for more quality and less quantity. We will focus on the **quality of learning**, quality of co-curricular activities and community engagements and the quality of the whole school experience that the student goes through. We will seek to ... **give students themselves the room to exercise initiative and to shape their own learning.** (Shanmugaratnam 2005: col. 2136) (Emphasis mine)

Exactly what kind of learning the Minister was referring to and what counts as "quality learning" remains rather unclear. It is incumbent that quality learning is made explicit to students before they are given the autonomy to "shape their own learning". Boud (1995) argues that all assessment involves two inter-related activities:

First, is the development of knowledge and an appreciation of the appropriate standards and criteria for meeting those standards which may be applied to any given work (p.11).

Essentially, if the TLLM initiative seeks to promote learners' autonomy, it is important to ensure that learners first possess knowledge and know what counts as good work. Dweck (1989) drew a distinction between "learning" and "performance" goals (Dweck 1988: 88). According to Dweck (1998), in setting learning goals, individuals endeavour to increase their expertise. However in setting performance goals individuals strive to get a testimony of their competence.

Sfard's (1998) acquisition metaphor of learning as one of "gaining possession over some commodity" (p. 6) is seen within the ML syllabus where an example of such a "commodity" is the ability of a secondary two (14-year-old) ML pupil to "write different types of texts using the correct form of the language for various purposes, audience and situations" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division 2011: 19) (Translated from ML). By the age of 16, this skill is expected to have developed and the pupils should be able to write those types of texts effectively. While the ML syllabus makes due mention of the importance of the learning process, statements that allude to "product based" goals still pervade the curriculum. Perhaps this is a reflection of the underlying values and attitudes towards learning that is so entrenched within the ML education system.

In the literature on educational reform, it is clear that obstacles to change are inevitable (Evans 1996; Fullan 2007a; Fullan, and Miles, 1992; Hallinger 2010; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, and 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, 1992, 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.

Shepard (2000) 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 power of the underlying assumptions and beliefs that teachers themselves have about learning. In other words, ML teachers' beliefs about learning need to be fully understood in order to discern their perceptions regarding AfL. James (2008) asserted that assumptions and beliefs about learning held by teachers lead to equivalent assumptions about the kinds of assessments that they would deem most appropriate. James adapted some headings developed by Watkins (2003) describing learning: "learning is being taught, learning is individual sense-making and learning is building knowledge as part of doing things with others" (James 2008: 21). Different beliefs about learning affect corresponding assessment practices. The descriptors of

learning within the ML syllabus would imply that the kinds of assessments carried out are more aligned to the tightly sequenced and hierarchical behaviourist model.

### Understanding Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus

Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity (Bourdieu, and Wacquant 1992), reoriented sociological research by placing an importance on researchers to continually reflect on their own dispositions towards the issues that they are examining. In this research, Bourdieusian concepts of *habitus*, *field*, *doxa* and *capital* provide a direct analysis of key facets in the context of AfL in ML education.

*Habitus* is a central concept in the Bourdieusian framework (Reay 2004). Bourdieu developed the notion of *habitus* to demonstrate the ways in which not only is an individual situated within a social context, but also the ways in which various axioms of that context are within the individual too (Bourdieu 1977a). Malay Language (ML) teachers' *habitus* with regards to assessment would affect their disposition towards Assessment for Learning (AfL). Their personal struggles with assessment in early schooling as a student and up until the moment that they become ML teachers, would develop their internalized schemas of thought and action with regards to AfL.

When an external challenge met differs from the "structured structures" (Bourdieu 1990: 53) in which the *habitus* was formed, an individual would improvise on their dispositions (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain 1998). Within this study, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* informs about teachers' different personal histories that shape their varied responses towards AfL. Sue Waite (2013) analyzed the concept of individual, local and institutional *habitus* and how varied dispositions to learning were at these levels. Her research centered around three schools in Southwest of England and applied the notion of *habitus* to develop a concept of cultural density (Waite 2013). Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) mentioned the usefulness of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to account for disparities in teachers' assessment practices. Within this study, I hoped to gain a vital understanding of the different dispositions that ML teachers have to AfL and the relation of such variation to their *habitus*. The study explores teachers' early assessment *habitus* in order to have a baseline understanding of what they consider as meaningful assessment practices. Few studies have looked into the impact of teachers' *habitus* on their assessment practices and beliefs. This research advances the understanding of Bourdieu's (1977a) notion of *habitus* within the context of Malay Language assessment.

### Impact of teachers' early assessment habitus

Interviews were carried out with twenty secondary school Malay Language teachers from Singapore to discover the teachers' *habitus* and degree to which they internalized AfL concepts and regard it as valuable. During the interviews, teachers were required 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 *habitus* translates into their current teaching practice. This included both sets of teachers who were AfL-oriented or performance-oriented. Ismail and Mariam who had an early assessment *habitus* that was 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 an early assessment *habitus* 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 assessments were constructive for them as students because the assessments 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)

I think results-based assessment was more meaningful to me. That kind of assessment proves that I am doing something correctly. I am learning in class. So throughout my primary and secondary school, I think the only thing that was beneficial was getting these results... Yes, I enjoyed exams and tests, yes! (Kayli)

Izrai revealed that he continues to believe in the benefits of rigorous texts 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)

Their early assessment *habitus* translating to current assessment practices and their stand that an initiative is worth the effort if it benefits their students. The following case study illustrates the impact of differences in teachers’ *habitus* on current classroom assessment practice, within the same school context.

### **The case of Azimah and Aisyah : Different habitus, practising AfL under exemplary leadership**

Azimah has 16 years of teaching experience with two different secondary schools. She began her teaching career in a mainstream government school for ten years before joining Green Vista, an independent school. Her vast experience meant that Azimah could share valuable insights into any particular factors that affected her assessment practices in either school. As one of only two ML teachers in Green Vista, Azimah had been designated as the informal subject coordinator for ML. Azimah reported to the Head of Mother Tongue Department who was a Chinese Language teacher. Azimah’s closest colleague was Aisha, the other ML teacher in Green Vista. The two teachers taught both ML and Higher ML across the various levels from Secondary One through Secondary Four (Years 7-10). Based on an

earlier survey carried out to determine teachers' extent of belief and practice of AfL, Azimah and Aisha had very different AfL profiles. While Azimah's profile was High Values-High Practice (HVHP), Aisha's was Low Values- Low Practice (LVLP). For the research I interviewed both teachers but observed only Azimah teaching in her classroom.

The school leaders in Green Vista were able to build the capacity of teachers' knowledge of AfL from the very beginning. Azimah admitted that her school's vice-principal, Mrs Tan, was the one who made the crucial difference in her views on assessment from being exam and performance oriented to being focused on students' learning:

Personally, when I was teaching in my previous school because of the drilling and of course the background of the students I had to tune in to exams...But I realized when I came here, with the new environment and under the leadership of Mrs Tan who really drilled us in the first year...she communicated to us: We don't tell the students that end point is the exams, it must go beyond. Because she said when we teach a language, we want them to be experts in that field. (Azimah)

The school's approach of increasing the teachers' collective knowledge of AfL through a well-structured programme was effective in helping develop individual teacher's AfL competencies and resources. The "drilling" that they received from Mrs Tan was a form of positive pressure on the teachers. It did not come across as an unfair expectation or unnecessary burden because it was accompanied by the support that teachers needed to practise AfL effectively in their classrooms.

This [school] term yes especially [AfL is discussed explicitly]...currently it is in-house Professional Development conducted by Mrs Tan and the School Staff Developer (SSD)...we got about three sessions now, we learn about the definition of AfL...what are the tools for AfL. And so there is a sort of structured but in-house training.... Yes [it is important that a school leader like Mrs Tan is part of it]. (Aisha)

Although Azimah joined Green Vista in 2011 and was introduced to the school's vision about assessment then, four years on she was still motivated to practise and learn more about AfL. When she faced challenges in teaching or implementing AfL, her school leaders were supportive and encouraging:

Mr Lee (former principal for Green Vista School) was very particular about time... so we are productive. Yes, term time is hectic but during our down time, nobody disturbs us, not even an email, because management really respects and protects that time. So me and Aisha say to one another when we are tired: It's ok, let's continue and we have staff supporting each other. (Azimah)

It (the challenge for AfL) is time. Because sometimes we feel oh we are rushing certain syllabus...and that is when senior management reminds us...when you are just talking about syllabus, you are so boxed up. (Azimah)

Mrs Tan's constant and explicit reminder for her teachers to not be performance-oriented in their teaching was a signal of how committed the school leadership was towards AfL. Teachers are reassured that they do not have to worry about their performance being pegged to students' assessment outcomes.

A good teacher does not teach to the test or exams. In fact here in Green Vista we remind teachers to never mention that the reason they are teaching something is so that the students will do well at exams. (Mrs Tan, Vice principal Green Vista Secondary, 13 April 2015)

The strong peer support system that school leaders developed in Green Vista was evident. From the interviews I sensed that Azimah and Aisha were close and worked well together to tackle any issues they had with their students. Azimah could also count on her other colleagues for ideas on how to improve teaching and learning in class. All the teachers with the exception of the principal and vice principals worked in one staff room. This is unique because

usually in a typical school setting, subject heads and heads of departments are in separate staff rooms, away from other teachers. Being in close quarters with her peers meant Azimah had easy access to information about the students and their performance in other classes:

... We get to solve problems almost immediately, because our staff room here is only one, very easy access for information. (Azimah)  
 ... We do lots of sharing across department, within department and there is a lot of exchanging of ideas, we go into classrooms, we have a lot of peer observations. (Azimah)

As a leader, Mrs Tan was clear about the school's vision with regards to assessment and was persistent in ensuring that vision was translated into practice. Mrs Tan did not view AfL as an innovative reform. Instead she saw AfL as part of everyday teaching and not something that was extraordinarily different from what teachers should be doing in classrooms. As a leader she conveyed this very clearly to her teachers and was instrumental in ensuring that the vision was shared:

If you ask me how to sustain AfL as an innovation... well firstly it's not really an innovation is it? It's just part and parcel of good teaching....We don't assess for exams. We assess to help them be better learners in the future. That is the sort of vision we share with our teachers when it comes to assessing their students. And all my teachers know that. (Mrs Tan, Vice principal Green Vista Secondary, 13 April 2015)

The leadership's persistence in enacting reform was balanced by their flexibility in helping teachers cope with their existing workload. Azimah clarified that the school's teaching arrangement which encouraged teachers to teach the same class from the beginning of Secondary 1 right up until when the students graduate at Secondary 4 had given her more liberty to rearrange the curriculum structure and incorporate learning more meaningfully. This was consistent with her survey response where she reported that it was unimportant for her to determine her next lesson by what was prescribed in the curriculum. For Azimah her students' in-depth understanding of her lessons was what mattered the most:

I think normally what we [me and Aisha] decide here is we follow them up. So we can play with the time that we have, rather than after this level, pass them to another teacher and another teacher, then it becomes difficult. I must say that our curriculum, we don't follow what MOE sets for us actually. Although we use the textbook, workbook for example composition, we don't teach all three types of composition in Sec 1... I have that time to play and at the same time I can go in-depth. Rather than the breadth without the depth.... So one thing we teachers are given here is the liberty of shaping our curriculum and assess students only based on what we teach. (Azimah)

The persistence and flexibility exemplified by the school leadership when it came to encouraging AfL permeated into Azimah's classroom assessment practices. In her lessons Azimah was always patient, adaptable and willing to give her students' the time to think through their responses. Her lessons did not feel rushed to attain set lesson objectives. In fact in one of the exchanges, Azimah invited the students to consider her technique of lesson introduction:

Azimah:[After introducing the lesson by asking some questions on a topic and getting students' responses] Now think...why did I ask you those questions?

Student: Because that is what we are learning today?

Azimah: All right...but what was my objective?

Student: To get us thinking about the topic? To get us interested? To let us know it is important?

Azimah: So did it get you thinking? Is it important?

Student: Yes we think so.  
(Classroom observation, 13 April 2015)

Based on the findings discussed above and the excerpts from my interview with Azimah, I have mapped her sociocultural experiences and premises onto the research's theoretical framework (Figure 1). Azimah had a strong personal belief in the importance of the learning process. She was always very clear of her vision for her students to be more than just high scoring students in the national exams. She envisioned them to be leaders of the community who could contribute to the development of the Malay society in Singapore. She received strong support for her AfL practice from her school leaders, particularly her Vice Principal (VP) who insisted that teachers make no mention of exams or marks during teaching. Azimah's school environment was very nurturing and full of positivity. It allowed AfL practice to thrive and Azimah's capacity in AfL to grow.

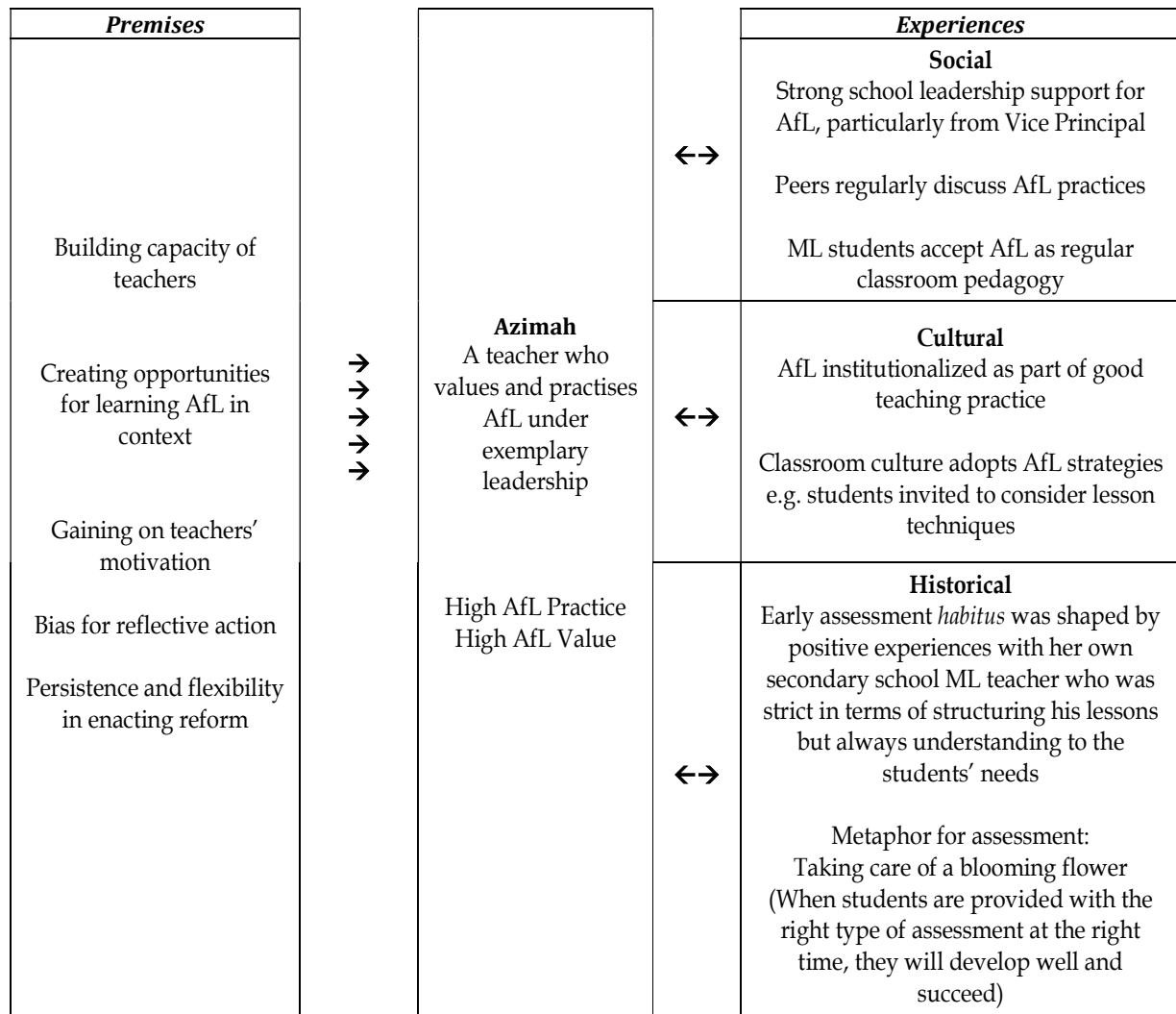


Figure 1: Mapping of Azimah's case on theoretical framework

As seen in rightmost column of Figure 1, Azimah's early assessment *habitus* was impacted by the presence of an understanding teacher who was sensitive to his students' needs. Azimah's metaphor for assessment was AfL-oriented and concerned with giving students the right type of assessment support. In contrast, Aisha, whose survey scores showed that she did not practice AfL as much as she valued it, shared that her early assessment *habitus* consisted of "pen and paper tests". The metaphor Aisha shared for assessment was "Assessment is like a measuring tape", used to measure students' performance. The differences in Azimah's and Aisha's past assessment *habitus* and personal beliefs about learning and assessment reveal that such historical factors greatly affect teachers' AfL profiles despite having a school environment where conditions for assessment reform are fulfilled.

## Conclusions Drawn and Implications

The findings have unveiled new knowledge regarding the impact of teachers' early assessment *habitus* 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. As discussed by Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002), Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* characterises the beliefs and practices of individuals that have been inculcated through their interactions with social agents and establishments. For ML teachers, their assessment *habitus* has 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 *habitus*, which consisted of "pen and paper tests", affected the extent of her belief and practice of AfL. In the survey regarding teachers' extent of belief and practice of AfL, Azimah scored higher than Aisha, meaning that she valued and practiced AfL more than her colleague. Azimah's early assessment *habitus* was impacted by the presence of an understanding teacher who was sensitive to his students' needs. Her metaphor for assessment was AfL-oriented and concerned with giving students the right type of assessment support. In contrast, Aisha, revealed that her metaphor for assessment was "Assessment is like a measuring tape", used to measure students' performance. The differences in Azimah's and Aisha's past assessment *habitus* and personal beliefs about learning and assessment reveal that such historical factors could greatly affect teachers' AfL profiles. I propose that beyond acknowledging teachers' assumptions about learning, it is important to accept and recognize teachers' early assessment *habitus* for successful AfL implementation. It may be necessary to explicitly convey the importance of AfL to a teacher like Aisha, who found performance-oriented strategies to be effective for herself as a learner, and emphasize on the benefits that such assessment reform has for his students.

In this study I delved deeper into ML teachers' *habitus* by asking respondents to not only reflect on these early assessment experiences but to also discern which experiences were positive and meaningful for them as learners. 11 teachers disclosed that they experienced meaningful AfL-oriented assessment practices while the other nine felt that their *habitus* was 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 *habitus* into their current assessment *habitus* 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 *habitus*" of teachers in Singapore, there are ML teachers with constructive assessment *habitus*. Hogan (2011) argued that the impact of teachers' *habitus* together with the complex multimodal structure of instructional governance in Singapore, make it unlikely for changes in instructional practices to be significant or sustainable. I disagree and feel that 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. I suggest that beyond acknowledging teachers' assumptions about learning, it is also imperative to accept and recognize teachers' early assessment *habitus* for successful AfL implementation.

ML teachers need to have an awareness of their own assessment *habitus* and the impact of their *habitus* on their current classroom assessment practices. There is a tendency for teachers to be overly comfortable with specific assessment practices as they are familiar with the implementation and the measurement of outcomes. In order for AfL to take root, there is a need for teachers to be critical and to engage with their peers as to which strategies are most



effective in a given context. Support from school leadership will go a long way in ensuring that teachers are provided with the opportunities to improve themselves and be familiar with innovative educational practices. When teachers are aware of their own bias for certain types of assessment processes (especially performance-oriented ones) based on what had worked for them as students, it may be easier for them to acknowledge that in the current context of holistic education that Singapore is moving towards, their students will stand to benefit from AfL-oriented strategies. This awareness can be cultivated from teachers' own self-reflection or discussion amongst peers and should be encouraged by school leaders.

Policy-makers and school leaders need to consider the impact of teachers' assessment *habitus* on their current assessment practices. Other than introducing AfL and providing resources to support teachers' practices, policy-makers 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 an assessment *habitus* that was more performance-oriented. Policy-makers need to strategize efforts around acknowledging these varied *habitus* 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.

## Endnotes

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