

# Developing assessment literacy in Singapore: How teachers broaden English language learning by expanding assessment constructs

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This paper explains how teachers working in a distinctive educational policy context in Singapore expanded their assessment practices to broaden English language learning in their classrooms. The educational policy context, known as the Integrated Programmes, has been implemented since 2004 for selected schools in the country to de-emphasise the influence of examinations and promote teacher autonomy to enhance students' learning.

More specifically, this paper discusses the findings of a study where a small group of high school teachers expanded their language learning and assessment constructs beyond those considered in the national examination and mainstream school practices in the country. They did this by (1) paying greater attention to culture, (2) building on an extended understanding of genres, (3) giving increased importance to content knowledge, and (4) placing a stronger emphasis on higher-order thinking, learning, and communicating in authentic contexts.

While these four areas are drawn from the distinctive educational context of the Integrated Programmes, they serve to illuminate and illustrate how English language teachers in general can develop their assessment literacy to expand beyond the assessment constructs examined in high stakes tests to increase students' learning in their local contexts.

**Keywords:** English Language assessment; assessment for learning; teacher-based assessment; assessment reform

## 1 Introduction

This paper contributes to the understanding of teacher-based English language (EL) assessment practices at a time when long-held fundamental assumptions and priorities in educational assessment have come under question and new

conceptualisations of educational assessment, including EL assessment, are emerging in research, policy and practice.

Notwithstanding the use of increasingly sophisticated analytical tools in the last two decades (Bachman, 2000; Stiggins, 2002), the psychometric paradigm of educational measurement has shifted to “a broader model of educational assessment” (Gipps, 1994, p. 1) where assessment caters to the learning needs of students. Such assessment is referred to as “formative assessment” or “assessment for learning” (AfL) (Harlen, 2005; James, 2000).

Exemplifying the new assessment paradigm is the distinctive Integrated Programmes (IP) policy innovation context in Singapore, which de-emphasises examinations and encourages teacher-based assessment practices to broaden the learning of highly able students in top performing schools. The de-emphasising of examinations in the IP is seen most conspicuously in the form of its two flagship features: first, the removal of the Year 10 Singapore-Cambridge GCE Ordinary Level (O-Level) national examination, which continues to serve as the gatekeeping examination for students in mainstream schools in Singapore to progress to junior college and polytechnics; and, second, allowing the IP students direct entry to junior college education in Years 11 and 12. Notwithstanding these features of the IP, it must be noted that the policy innovation is still located within a wider culture that is driven by “assessment of learning” (AoL) purposes and practices, including an endpoint at Year 12 which is still measured by a national examination.

Scarino (2009) explains that the conceptualising of the assessment construct drives the other three processes in the assessment cycle: eliciting; judging, and validating (Scarino, 2009). Wiliam (2010) adds that “construct interpretations are at the heart of validity argument and therefore construct definition is essential to effective assessment” (p. 278). The study discussed in this paper examined how teachers developed and expanded their EL learning and assessment constructs in the IP, a distinctive context which facilitated greater autonomy in teachers’ pedagogical and assessment practices and, as such, provided an environment where changes in these practices could be observed more sharply.

The following section provides the background to the study by describing the dominant examination culture in Singapore and the curriculum and examination relevant to mainstream schools, against the backdrop of which the IP was set up and has evolved. Section 3 describes the motivation and the context for the study, and Section 4 presents the methodology. Section 5 presents the discussion on the areas in which teacher-participants demonstrated an expansion of assessment constructs to enhance their students’ learning.

## 2 Background to study

The dominance of examination culture, especially in many Asian countries, including Singapore, has been documented in a number of studies (see, for example, Berry (2011), Kennedy (2007), and Cheah (1998)).

In Singapore the national examinations at the end of Years 6, 10 and 12 typically serve the AoL purposes of selection for higher education and recognition for employment (Tan, Chow & Goh, 2008), and play a critical role in facilitating “the meritocracy ideology of pragmatism that permeates Singaporean public discourse” (Towndrow, Silver & Albright, 2010, p. 428).

Reflecting the dominant examination culture, the national EL examinations in Singapore too have a strong washback effect on pedagogical and assessment practices in the country. An example of the strong influence of the examination culture is evident in the continual EL assessments set by Singapore schools, which resemble mini-examinations rather than as assessments tailored to improve learning (Cheah, 1998; Kramer-Dahl, 2008b).

In the context of this study, the immediately relevant national examination is the O-Level EL examination as reflected in EL Examination Syllabus 1127 (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, 2014). Table 1 below provides an outline of this EL examination syllabus, which was developed to assess the intended EL curriculum as documented in the 2001 EL Syllabus (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2001).

**Table 1.** Outline of O-Level EL Examination Syllabus 1127

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Skill</b>	<b>Components</b>	<b>Weighting</b>
1	Composition	1. Free writing (300-500 words) 2. Situational writing (250-350 words)	40%
2	Comprehension (Text length: about 1200 words)	1. Comprehension 2. Vocabulary 3. Summary	40%
3	Oral communication	1. Reading aloud 2. Picture discussion 3. Conversation	20%

As evident in Table 1, the written EL examination focuses on one-off timed composition and comprehension tests. For the composition paper, the Situational Writing section is compulsory but there is a choice of topics and genres in the Free Writing section. However, the majority of teachers and students tend to favour a narrative in the Free Writing section as the common perception is that it is easier to write this genre and to do well in it. Consequently, not enough attention is given to other genres such as exposition and argumentative writing, which are also part of the intended curriculum. In the comprehension paper, the assessment constructs are

limited to literal and inferential reading and summary writing; the paper does not assess application or critical reading skills. For the oral communication paper, the picture discussion and conversation components are conducted by oral examiners, and the focus is on assessing clarity of speech and coherent responses to the picture and oral prompts.

The intended secondary EL curriculum in Singapore is “in close alignment with future-focused literacy demands” (Kramer-Dahl, 2008b, p. 4) as it addresses the demands of communicating in a globalising world (Rubdy & Tupas, 2009; Kramer-Dahl, 2008a). Particularly praiseworthy in this regard is the key aim of the syllabus to make explicit the text-context relationship so that “learners can make structural and linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture” (Kramer-Dahl, 2008a, p. 87). Another noteworthy feature of the syllabus is its emphasis on developing “higher levels of literacy” (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2001, p. 8), including skills such as evaluative and critical listening and reading skills, as well as process writing skills.

Despite these intended aims, a study of the enacted EL curriculum in more than 200 schools in Singapore still revealed a system where the pedagogical and assessment practices were “clearly at odds with the broader, more flexible and multi-dimensional notions of teaching and learning” (Kramer-Dahl, 2008b, p. 5). These findings were corroborated by other studies (Goh, Zhang, Ng & Koh, 2005; Kramer-Dahl, 2008a; Kwek, Albright & Kramer-Dahl, 2007).

An analysis of the O-Level EL examination syllabus and past years’ question papers reveals that the examination has not made significant changes to assess the higher literacy levels advocated in the 2001 EL Syllabus (Lin, 2003; Kramer-Dahl, 2008a, 2008b). Rather, the O-Level EL examination syllabus may be best described as assessing an individual’s language ability in the terms described by Bachman and Palmer (1996), according to which language is conceptualised as a systematic code and language ability consists of language knowledge and metacognitive strategies (Bachman, 2002). This conceptualisation of the examination syllabus is described in Figure 4 as “language ability and limited view of language use”.

### **3 Motivation and context for the study**

While educational research claims a tradition of conceptualising assessment as an instrument that provides evidence of student learning, inadequate attention has been paid to understanding how teachers interpret and manage their classroom assessment practices – a growing concern in the field of EL assessment and educational assessment (Davison, 2004). This gap is significant to educational policy and practice in the face of mounting evidence which shows that AfL practices improve pupils’

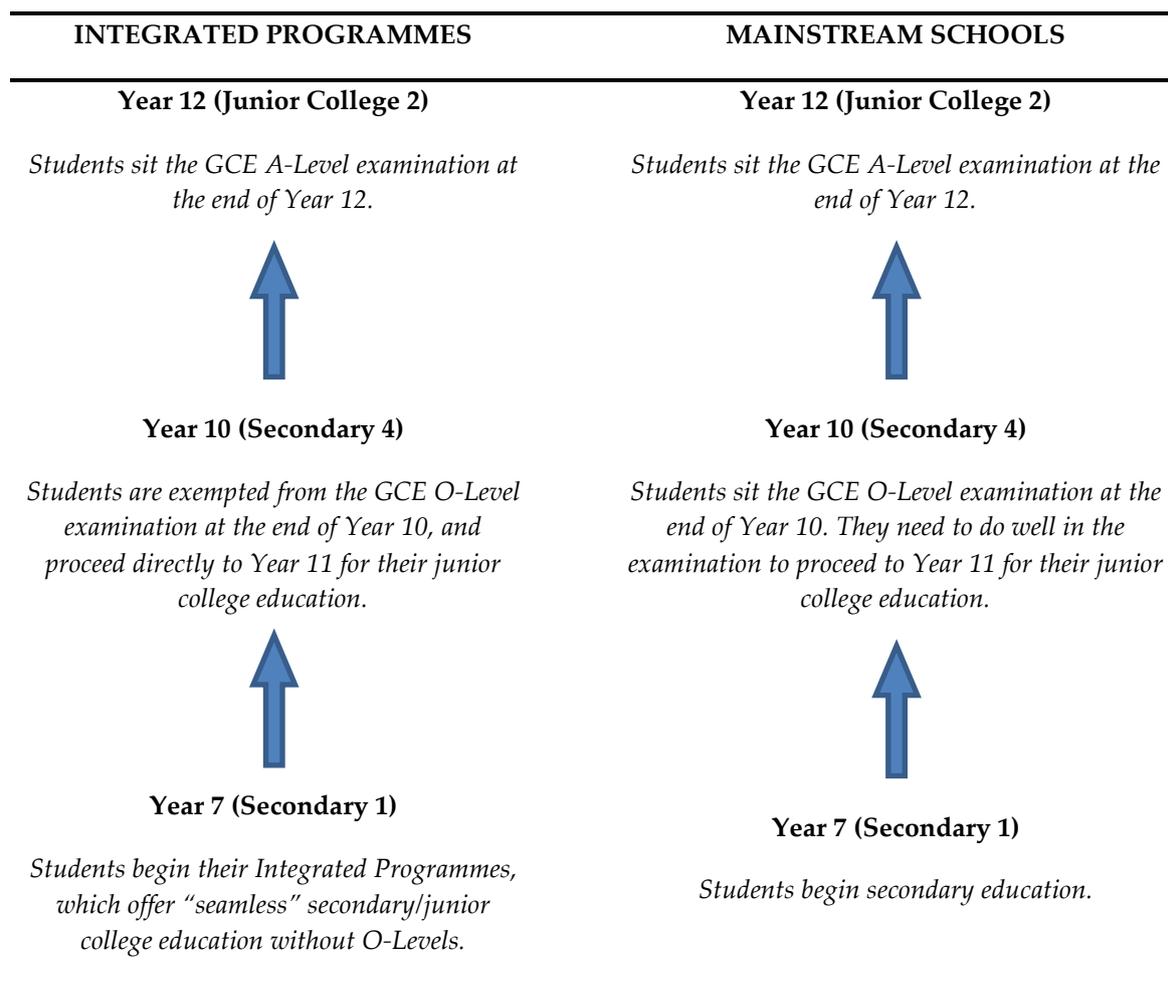
achievement and teachers can transform ideas from research into productive practices (Black, 2005).

In recent years, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has embarked on a number of new initiatives to make the curriculum more flexible and diverse so that students with special talents can develop more fully and schools can develop their own areas of excellence (MOE, 2006; MOE, 2004). The IP, which has been offered since 2004 to a select group of highly able and clearly university-bound secondary/junior college students (Year 7 to Year 12 students), is a prominent initiative in this regard. It reflects the broad-ranging dialogue on high-stakes assessment reform in the country, especially in moving towards selectively exempting student groups from high-stakes assessment (Koh & Luke, 2009).

As noted earlier, the IP removes the requirement for their students to sit for the compulsory O-Level national examination to progress from secondary school to junior college and provide a high level of systemic support and autonomy for their teachers. The IP thus provides a rare opportunity to gather data which exemplify teachers' interpretation and management of EL assessment practices as they start to move away from standardised examination-driven assessment and offers the potential to bring sharpness to the data needed to illuminate the research focus and render the significant issues more visible.

Reflecting the focus on understanding teachers' direct assessment experiences and their interpretation of these experiences is the single, overarching research question of this study: *"How do teachers interpret and manage EL assessment practices in the policy innovation context of the IP?"*

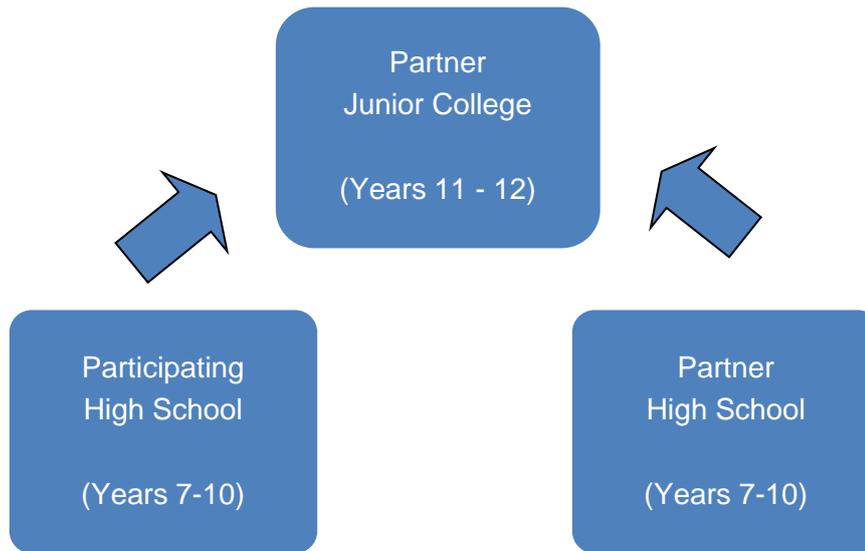
While the IP exempts its students from the O-Level examinations, it must be emphasised that, at the end of the IP (that is, at Year 12, the final year of junior college education), its students still need to sit the Singapore-Cambridge GCE Advanced Level (A-Level) national examination, similar to their counterparts in mainstream schools (Kang, 2005). Figure 1 compares the IP in the two participating schools with the programme in mainstream schools.



**Figure 1.** Comparison of the IP in the two participating schools with mainstream schools

Notwithstanding the continued presence of the A-Level examination at the end of Year 12, the historical significance of the IP is worthy of note, challenging the deeply held belief in the system that “every student [should be] ‘measured’ through the same standardised and centrally administered high-stakes examinations” (Kang, 2005, p. 53). As the exemption is only relevant for a select group of highly able students in top performing schools who are described as “clearly university-bound” (MOE, 2004, p. 1), the IP can perhaps be described as a guarded attempt at innovation, particularised with the safety net of the calibre of students and schools.

Both the participating schools belong to the family school model of the IP, as shown in Figure 2. In this model, a secondary school is affiliated to a junior college, and all secondary students are assured of a place in the affiliated junior college as soon as they are enrolled in the IP in Secondary 1.



**Figure 2.** The IP family school model of the participating schools

Having noted the research context of the IP, we shall turn our attention to the methodology used in this study.

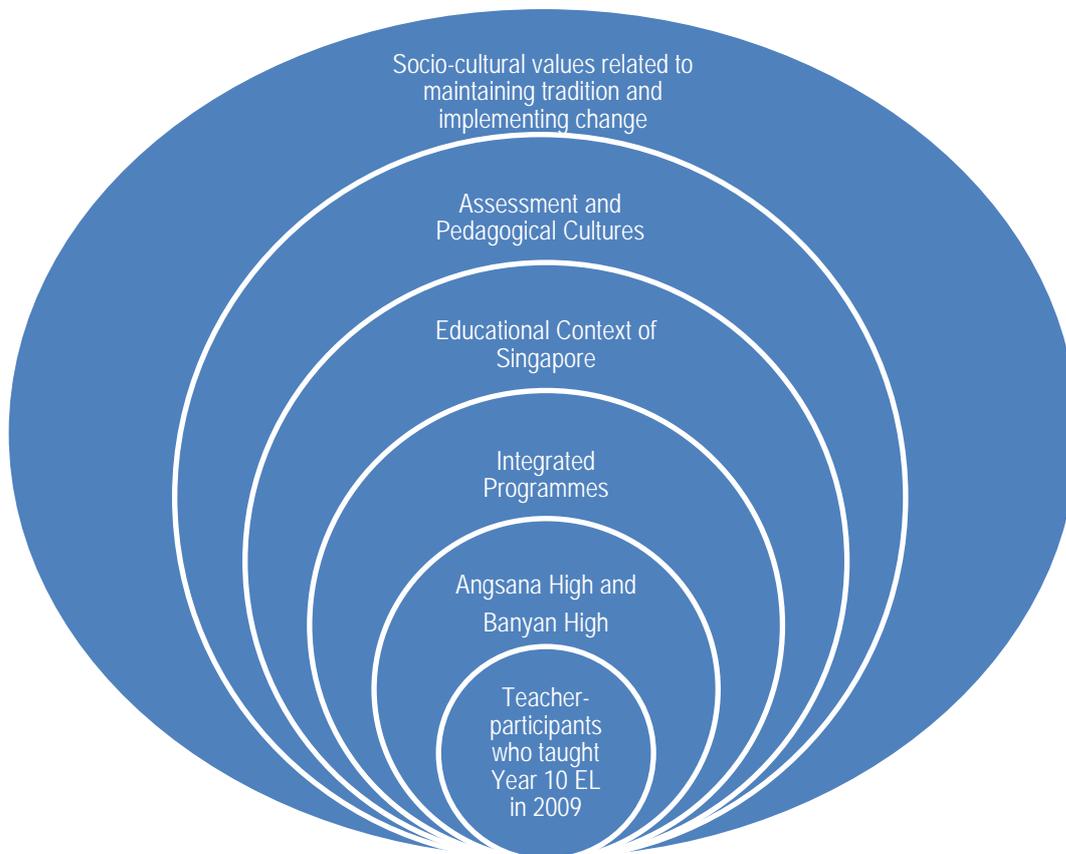
## 4 Methodology

As the purpose of the study was to achieve a deep understanding of teachers' perspectives of their interpretation and management of assessment practices, it became necessary to use an interpretive research approach that seeks to understand assessment practices from the inside: that is to say from the point of view of the teachers themselves. Moreover, the purpose of the study also required a methodological approach that yielded rich data on the conceptual and practical aspects of teachers' assessment practices.

In line with these requirements, this research adopted a "collective case study" approach (Creswell, 2007, p. 62; Stake, 2000, p. 437) to document the direct professional experiences of eight teachers: four each from Angsana High and Banyan High (pseudonyms). The eight teachers were chosen from Year 10 as it was important to capture what IP schools did in the year where students in mainstream schools would normally be prepared for their O-Level national examination. The teachers all had at least two years of teaching experience in the IP and represented the range of different programmes offered under the IP umbrella. In each school, the Subject Head or the Head of Department participated in the study as they had the potential to offer different perspectives owing to their larger professional responsibilities.

Each case in this collective case study was therefore a teacher in the IP who taught Year 10 EL in 2009, the year in which data was collected. Figure 3 shows the case in

cultural, spatial and temporal terms, revealing “a complex entity operating within a number of contexts” (Stake, 2000, p. 440).



**Figure 3.** Cases and their contexts

The primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with teacher-participants at the beginning, middle and end of the school year. This primary data was supplemented and corroborated by stimulated recall of marking, lesson observations, and analysis of assessment, instructional, curricular and policy documents. These methods allowed for a deep understanding of teacher-based EL assessment practices from the teachers’ viewpoints and, simultaneously, facilitated an in-built corroboration of the interpretive reality presented by the teacher-participants. The data collection procedures used in this study are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Data collection methods/data sets

Data Collection Methods/Data Sets	Rationale
<p><i>Semi-structured interviews.</i> I used this method to gain in-depth insights on teacher-participants' perspectives on their assessment practices and choices.</p>	<p>To elicit teachers' perspectives on assessment practices: what they have done in terms of assessment and why they have done it</p>
<p><i>Stimulated recall.</i> Using this technique, I invited each teacher-participant to describe how they had assessed the essays of two students.</p>	<p>To elicit teachers' perspectives on how they judged writing pieces</p>
<p><i>Lesson observations.</i> I observed two lessons taught by each teacher-participant and took field notes.</p>	<p>To examine actual practice and to relate them to teachers' accounts of their assessment practices</p>
<p><i>Document analysis.</i> I collected teacher-developed assessment plans, procedures and students' work (including assessment material that teachers used and assignments that students produced) together with teachers' feedback on the assignments.</p>	<p>To examine actual practice and to relate them to teachers' accounts of their assessment practices</p>
<p><i>Document analysis.</i> I collected policy documents related to the IP, the MOE English curriculum, the GCE examinations, and the curriculum in IP schools.</p>	<p>To understand the policy changes and the context of the school programmes, and to relate them to teachers' accounts of their assessment practices</p>

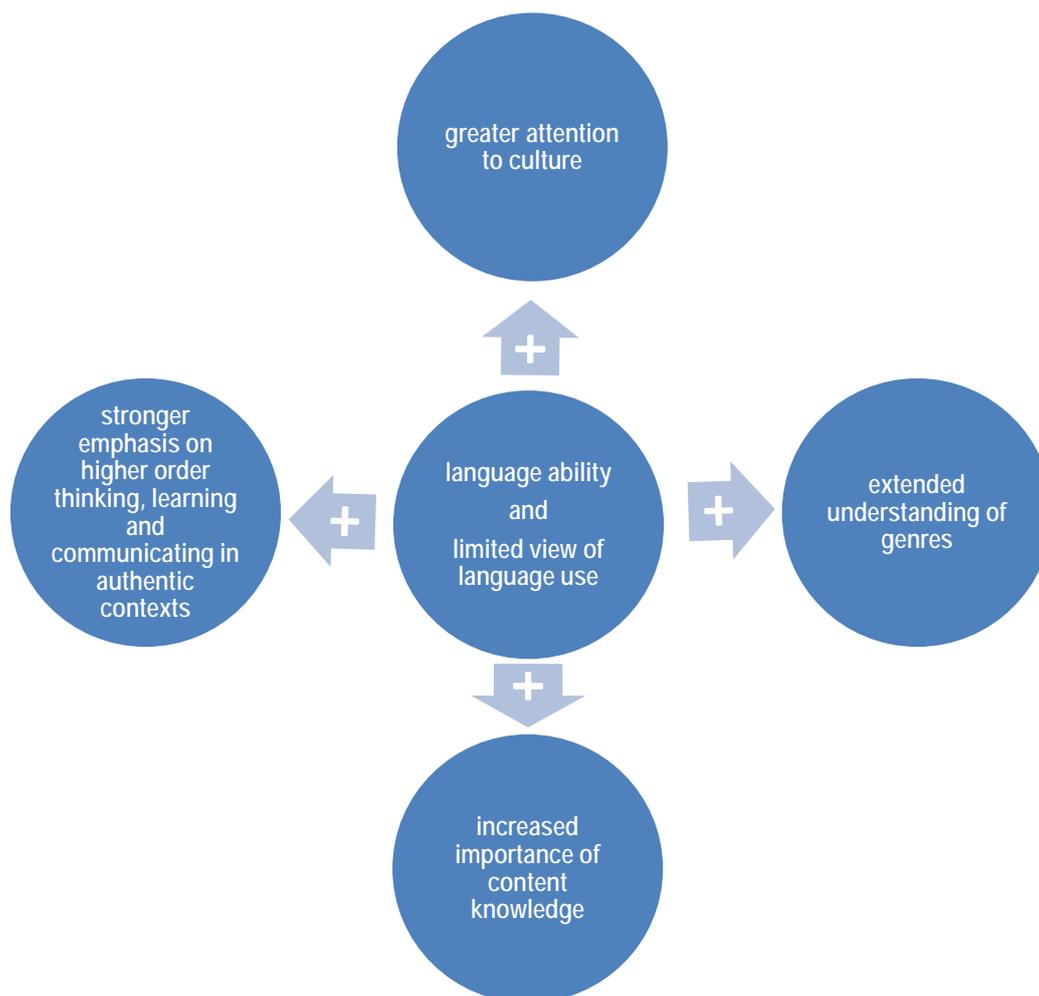
The data were analysed inductively, and the analysis involved codifying and categorising the interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and comparing them with the whole data set using a continual comparison method that included repeated readings of teacher-participants' responses (Lalik & Potts, 2001) and strategies to see what "[the] data [were] 'telling' us at some larger level". Three themes emerged from this analysis: reframing, differentiating and valuing. Each theme described an "angle of seeing" (Shank, 2006, p. 157) how the teacher-participants interpreted and managed their EL assessment practices by revealing their participation in the co-existent AoL and AfL cultures.

Distilling the analysis of the three themes revealed a significant expansion of teacher-based assessment practices to increase students' EL learning in the IP, as compared to conventional practices in mainstream schools that followed closely the formats, procedures and standards of national examinations. As mentioned earlier, this paper focuses on the findings related to the expansion of assessment constructs.

## **5 Results and discussion**

The study found that teacher-participants in the supportive IP context expanded the learning and assessment constructs beyond those found in the mainstream EL curriculum and O-Level examination respectively to enhance their students' EL capability (in line with the broader goals of the IP). Specifically, the analysis identified four areas of construct expansion: (1) language and culture, (2) language and genre, (3) language and content knowledge, and (4) language and higher-order thinking, learning and communicating in authentic contexts.

Of critical note is the fact that teacher-participants conceptualised the expansion of the constructs as essential to achieving an advanced capability in EL suited to their high-ability students. Figure 4 depicts the four ways in which teacher-participants expanded the EL constructs in the divergial radials. This figure illustrates a relational perspective as each arrow shows a particular construct expansion (from the base constructs of language ability and limited view of language use evident in the O-level EL examination syllabus and mainstream school practices). The four areas of expansion, described in the teacher-participants' own terms, are integrally tied to the conception of language in use and are relevant to issues of current interest in the language assessment field.



**Figure 4.** Four ways in which teacher-participants expanded the EL constructs

Defining the construct of language ability remains a contentious issue in the field as it varies across different cultural contexts and has been manipulated for different purposes (Ross, 2008). Yet, as this study shows, this leeway can be exploited in different contexts by teachers to better serve the needs of students in their local contexts.

As noted in Section 2, the O-Level EL examination syllabus focused on assessing an individual's language ability in the terms described by Bachman and Palmer (1996), according to which language is a systematic code and language ability consists of language knowledge and metacognitive strategies (Bachman, 2002). This view, encapsulated in Figure 4 as "language ability and limited view of language use", has been criticised as it "incorporates interaction from an individual-focused cognitive perspective" (Chalhoub-Deville, 2003, p. 369) and does not reflect the growing consensus in the field that language use is a social practice (McNamara & Roever, 2006). Moreover, as this view focuses on the abilities the individual possesses, context is seen to be only important to the extent that it draws out those intended abilities.

An alternative view advocated by Chalhoub-Deville (2003) is that “individual ability and contextual facets interact in ways that change them both” (p. 369). Consequently, Chalhoub-Deville (2003) argues for “an ability–in language use–in context” view to be preferred over the “ability–in language user” representation by Bachman (2002) (p. 369). Relatedly, Byrnes (2005) notes that the repositioning of language “in terms of its use, and not an arbitrary system of signs, much less a primarily formalist, rule-based, individual-cognitive enterprise” (p. 279), has recently gained currency in language teaching. We see evidence of this repositioning in Banyan High teacher-participants’ emphasis on a variety of oral tasks which allow skills such as eye contact, body gesture, negotiation and building on other students’ knowledge to be built into the assessment construct, in contrast to the more limited constructs in the O-Level examination.

However, it must be acknowledged that an acceptance of the approach taken by Chalhoub-Deville (2003) or Byrnes (2005) entails a local, context-bound view of language ability, which is difficult to reconcile with the need for score generalizability. Moreover, as indicated by Davison and Leung (2009), this “emphasis on language use in context calls into action a multifaceted combination of linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural resources” (p. 406), which raises the question of how a teacher-assessor decides “what to foreground in any set of assessment criteria and what to downplay or even ignore” (p. 407).

This difficulty is acknowledged by teacher-participants as well as they struggle with assigning appropriate assessment tasks for students of different abilities for the same assessment component. While they express the need to maximise learning in task design for students of different abilities and interests, they acknowledge that it raises issues of comparability of demands and standards. As one of the teacher-participants in Banyan High expresses in an ambivalent manner, his school is “still working through” the disjunction between giving “a more demanding task and us[ing] the same rubrics” while they continue with their practice of setting different kinds of tasks for the same assessment component for different ability student groups such as described below:

For the rest of the Sec 4 level, all they had to do was to look for any sub-topic or area of “war and conflict” and present it as a group. For my class...as they were a strong literature class, they focused on war poetry. They had to do a poetry analysis of one of the war poems, link it to the contextual issues of that period when the poem was written, and then link it to the larger issue of “war and conflict” as a whole. So, same task, “war and conflict”, worth the same amount, they had to present it for the same amount of time; but the demands were different.

As noted in studies such as Cheah (1998), Kramer-Dahl (2008a, 2008b) and Kwek, Albright and Kramer-Dahl (2007), the washback effects of the O-Level EL examination, which is restricted to assessing language ability and limited (functional) language use, were highly significant in areas of classroom pedagogy and assessment in mainstream schools, as they “unintentionally produced a ceiling on higher-order, critical dispositions and capacities on the part of both students and teachers” (Kramer-Dahl, 2008b, p. 5).

In contrast, the present study revealed that the teacher-participants in IP schools found ways to remove the ceiling effects of the O-Level examination by expanding their EL learning and assessment constructs for their high-ability students. In fact, teacher-participants were determined to prevent the examination taking over their curriculum as demonstrated in their expanded view of language and language use as well as in a more elaborate construction of learning and assessment constructs and their motivation to use curriculum-embedded assessment to enhance students’ learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011).

We shall now turn to the following four sub-sections which discuss each area of construct expansion demonstrated by the teacher-participants.

### **5.1 Language and culture**

The most visible construct expansion is in the greater emphasis on the relationship between language and culture, which encourages students to perceive the world in new and broad ways by making connections between their experiences in diverse cultural contexts (Byram, 2006).

This expansion is done mainly through the integration of literary texts into the EL curriculum and assessment, which reveals the privileging of high culture rather than the cultural construction of meanings. This integration promotes an aesthetic view of language, where style and substance blend to produce a heightened appreciation of sensation and emotion in students as compared to the cultivation of pure functionality of language use. The change is seen by the participating schools to be so significant that the subject is even called by a new name, “Language Arts”. In both schools, this subject was only offered to students with a strong EL ability. For example, in Angsana High, it was only offered to the top 20 percent of the cohort.

The assessment construct is not just the knowledge of the texts but also the appreciation of the texts in students’ own cultural contexts. As such, the construct goes beyond an efferent reading where “the text is regarded as a closed and finished object that a student can only contemplate passively from the perspective established by the teacher” and encourages an aesthetic reading which promotes deeper reflection about the texts (Hernandez Riwes Cruz, 2010, p. 4).

## **5.2 Language and genre**

The second area in which teachers expanded the assessment construct relates to an extended understanding of genres. This extended understanding can be seen in five ways. First, each participating school re-sequenced the teaching of exposition and persuasive writing so that these genres feature as a compulsory aspect of their upper secondary curriculum. In contrast, in mainstream schools these genres tended to be treated superficially by students and teachers, as they were seen as significantly more difficult options and therefore usually avoided in examinations.

Second, teacher-participants also moved beyond identifying expository works as those which followed a fixed structure and emphasised “clarity above all”, and started to promote and reward creative works such as parodies, at least for their more capable students.

Third, teacher-participants extended understandings of persuasive writing beyond non-fictional genres and argued that narrative writing had been used in real life to persuade people and even “to move nations”. Again, they used the rubrics flexibly to reward such creative works.

Fourth, teacher-participants came to realise that genres were able to transcend the traditional boundaries. For instance, they described persuasion as having a mould that cut across print and visual modes, and exposition to be the same whether it was in oral or print form. This understanding of the construct allowed teachers to develop and assess students’ skills more efficiently across traditional modes in the discipline as teachers built on similar skills that were taught in relation to a different mode.

Fifth, with the introduction of literature, the subject boundaries were expanded to include a range of literary genres such as poetry, short stories and novels. In contrast, mainstream EL classrooms do not involve the study of literary texts.

The teacher-participants’ extended understanding of genres is related to recent developments in research in the field. Ifantidou (2011) notes that the “evasiveness of genre” can facilitate the development of pragmatic competence in second language academic settings “by illustrating how different manifestations of language choice in diverse situations may yield individual interpretations” (p. 333). In a similar vein, Byrnes (2002) notes that “the facilitating and constraining aspects of communicative choice within particular tasks ... are largely circumscribed by genres” and learners could develop the kind of creative freedoms within agreed upon frameworks that underlie the possibility for socially valid and yet personally marked meaning-making (p. 434).

### 5.3 Language and content knowledge

Another important way in which the construct was expanded by teacher-participants is through an increased emphasis on content knowledge, unlike the practice in mainstream schools where the emphasis was on language skill development. Since the essay topics (but not the specific essay questions) were covered beforehand as part of the themes in the EL curriculum in both schools, there was a stronger expectation in terms of content that students were expected to produce during assessment – even during timed tests and examinations, unlike the case in mainstream schools.

The teacher-participants justified their approach as a truer reflection of writing in the real world by pointing out that, in real life, people were not expected to write on an unfamiliar topic within an hour. Moreover, in Banyan High, students were also allowed to bring in notes to their first timed common test on free writing, which was part of their formal assessment. Furthermore, the O-Level examination essay marking rubrics, which integrated language and content, were divided into separate strands in both the IP schools, to facilitate more specific feedback on content. For informal assessment of her better language class, one teacher-participant even found it more useful to concentrate her feedback on topical knowledge and argumentation.

This focus on depth was also conveyed during a stimulated recall of a composition marking experience when a teacher-participant referred to the specific point mentioned by a female student “about North and South Korea being in conflict with each other because of different ideologies”, and impressed on her “the irony ... that [the labelling of] North and South Korea [was] [in fact] an artificial division of one country”. He raised this point with her for a number of reasons: the first two reasons related to her background – she had a history background and she was capable of “reflective” and “critical thinking”. By this, he meant that she was capable of appreciating this point and was likely to do so. The third reason is that “the next time she want[ed] to relate to the Korean issue, she [might] be able to expand on it a bit more”. What that translates to is that he was aware that he was helping her to grow in a broader sense of a learner rather than just developing functional writing skills.

While the field has traditionally regarded the effects of topical content on test performance as potential sources of error or bias, recent research suggests that “topical knowledge interacts with language ability to affect test performance” (Bachman 2002, p. 10), affecting the way we define constructs for language assessment. It is clear from the assessment task design that the two IP schools chose to define the construct in this way.

The study by Byrnes (2002), concluded that linking content and language

foster[ed] a heightened awareness of language as a network of interlocking options (Halliday, 1985) rather than as primarily a system of rules, thereby

highlighting and confronting issues of identity and voice within typified contexts (p. 434).

Relatedly, Leung (2007) makes the point that “a regard for discourse in context” will “reduce the level of conceptual abstractness” (p. 270) in language assessment. James and Gipps (1998) too note that students’ “active interaction with the content, particularly in relating new ideas to previous knowledge and experience” (p. 287) promotes a deep learning approach. Van Tassel-Baska (2002) also recommends that students need a strong knowledge base from which to work to aim at higher cognitive levels.

#### **5.4 Language and higher-order thinking, learning and communicating in authentic contexts**

Koh and Luke (2009) found that higher and intellectually demanding skills matter less to EL teachers in Singapore mainstream schools as they were not assessed in the examination. Against this backdrop, we can appreciate the importance of how teacher-participants found ways to emphasise higher-order thinking, learning and communication skills in EL assessment.

In the IP, the assessment of the literature component facilitates not only the assessment of the synthesis of knowledge and understanding of literary texts but also analytical thinking which requires students to link their personal responses to evidence from the literary texts in response to the given tasks. In addition, students are challenged to think spontaneously, especially in the assessment of the unseen text section, where they are expected to respond to a question on an unfamiliar literary extract by writing an essay.

The second way that teacher-participants emphasise higher-order thinking skills is by making connections across subjects. For instance, in Angsana High, four key macro concepts (such as “change”) ran across all subjects from Years 7 to 10. Teachers asked questions in informal EL assessment that guided students to make inter-disciplinary connections. Moreover, students in both schools were encouraged by teacher-participants to apply the content and skills they had learned in other subjects to EL, especially in essay writing. For instance, with regard to exposition and argumentation, teachers in IP schools emphasised not just generic writing skills but also the logical and argumentative skills which were taught in philosophy. The ability to develop ideas in a logical and persuasive way was factored into the EL construct, much more so than in mainstream schools. For example, teachers in Angsana High provided feedback on logic even though they were not required to do so, and were planning for their EL department to work even more closely with the philosophy department to improve students’ performance in this area as the students had not seemed to transfer learning across the two subjects satisfactorily. Relatedly, James and Gipps (1998) point

out that the approach of linking ideas through integrating principles and relating evidence to conclusions promotes a deep learning approach.

Higher-order thinking skills were also assessed in the oral examination. For instance, in Angsana High, students were asked to discuss a given quotation in their context (rather than a picture/general conversation topic as in the O-Level examination) because teachers saw it is as more suitable to assess critical thinking skills as it required students to unpack the quotation and relate it to their knowledge and experiences. The expanded oral construct was linked to the construct in argumentative writing by teachers as they both depended on the same skills.

Reading skills were assessed in the O-Level examination by a comprehension paper which included literal, inferential and paraphrasing questions, and a summary question on the same reading passage(s). Although the formal examinations for the reading comprehension paper in both schools still followed the same structure, both IP schools raised the difficulty level of the comprehension component of the paper by placing more importance on higher-order thinking skills. They did this by significantly increasing the proportion of inferential/interpretive/paraphrase questions to literal questions. One unwanted outcome of an emphasis on thinking skills was that students laboured over what were considered as straightforward questions and even gave wrong answers as a result. However, a more positive outcome was that the teacher-participants tended to treat comprehension lessons as opportunities to focus on and build specific skills rather than as opportunities for repeated practice of the full comprehension paper (as was generally the case in mainstream schools).

In addition, teachers in both schools highlighted the value of expanding the range of comprehension questions to Socratic and critical thinking questions (which were not found in the national examination) in formal and informal assessments. In Angsana High, this expanded reading construct was assessed informally, but, in Banyan High, students could choose to have the Socratic discussion assessed formally as part of their "free-pick" oral skill. Moreover, in Banyan High, teacher-participants introduced a new item known as the Stimulus Response Question, which assessed critical and evaluative thinking. This task required the students to not only understand and analyse the text but also to go beyond it to critique the ideas and to give their own point of view in extended prose. While this can be seen as preparation for the application question in the General Paper in junior college, the teachers also pointed out that this task honed the students' critical thinking skills as it required students not just to follow the argument but also to examine content for assumptions and evidence, and to repair poor arguments. One teacher-participant described the demand of this task as "way beyond what O-Level kids are doing".

Another way in which teacher-participants expanded the construct is to include the learning process as part of the construct, unlike the case with one-off timed examinations. Both schools practised process writing. The process approach to writing (a multi-step writing cycle that includes planning, drafting, revising, and editing in its stages) is required by MOE. In contrast, Cheah (1998) discovered that teachers in mainstream schools did not fully implement the process approach to writing because the national-examination focus was on an assessment product at the end of a timed test. Mainstream school teachers focused on editing rather than revising for content – that is, subsequent drafts did not focus on the development of students' ideas. Moreover, Cheah's interviews with Heads of English Departments revealed that they believed that the school curriculum did not allow time for conferencing with students as the process writing approach required, and that they thought that the students in Singapore were not ready to learn on their own.

In Angsana High, although process writing was not formalised, there was strong evidence of the process at the planning stage. However, in Banyan High, their five-step process writing cycle was given high importance as this was taken into account when grading students' writing portfolios. The writing portfolio was described as the school's "biggest formative assessment" as it stretched over six months. The writing portfolio thus enabled process writing skills such as drafting, peer-editing (peer-assessment), revising and reflection (self-assessment and metacognition) to become part of the construct and, therefore, form part of the assessment in the subject. Moreover, in Banyan High, even the essays produced in timed tests and examinations were used as first drafts and revised during subsequent lessons using the process writing approach. The different versions were submitted as part of the writing portfolio assessment as well.

During classroom assessment where the focus was not on examination practice, students were allowed to take home their essays. However, as the teachers in Banyan High noted, there was a disjunction between how a number of their students performed in class assignments (where they had more time to reflect and use information technology) and their performance in timed trials.

We note here the resonance with the work of Van Tassel-Baska (2002) who highlights the importance of assessment practices such as the portfolio that provide ongoing learning experiences over time in higher-level thinking. Underscoring this point, Gillet and Hammond (2009) note that an attention to the process reveals "a long view of learning" (p. 121) that encourages development and reflection. However, they lament that, while reflection has been shown to promote deep learning in the literature, "its place within assessment is perhaps too often overlooked" (p. 121). Seen in the light of this comment, we can appreciate the emphasis on metacognition as a construct as students were required to write extended reflections on their essays in the final stage of their process writing cycle. In Banyan High, process writing was

included as part of their formal assessment, although, interestingly enough, a decision was made to change that practice in the following year owing to concerns over the reliability of portfolio assessment.

Studies such as James and Gipps (1998) have called for more prominence to be given to authentic, real world experience in assessment. Koh, Tan and Ng. (2012) concur, as unlike conventional assessment tasks that assess low-level skills in artificial, contrived contexts, “authentic assessment tasks underscore knowledge construction, complex thinking, elaborated communication, collaboration and problem solving in authentic contexts” (p. 135).

The importance of real world experience as a construct can also be seen in the situational writing tasks that students in Banyan High do. Unlike the case in the O-Level examination where situational writing is based on an imaginary situation, the situational writing component has been adapted to reflect authentic situations such as students’ actual overseas school visits, or their community involvement project. Real world experience is the key emphasis here as is also the case with the task in Secondary 3 where students were required to produce authentic pieces of situational writing when they organised a real event, as seen in a teacher-participant’s description below:

So the kids were forced to select highlights, comment on authentic experience rather than just cook up some kind of a report, which is the O-Level format basically. We wanted them to ensure ... they all had content because they all went through this programme. So we wanted them to reflect, think through the whole experience and then write it for an adult audience.

The importance attached to the construct of real world experience also becomes evident in the teacher-participants’ emphasis on a personal voice for their students, which in turn can be linked to their real world experience. From teacher-participants’ accounts and my lesson observations, teachers not only continually encouraged students to come up with multiple perspectives but also to express their own voice. The emphasis on personal voice can be linked to the greater sense of individuality and sociability of students that the teachers hoped to develop, especially as these students were seen as future leaders. By giving more importance to personal understanding and expression, this approach promotes deeper learning (James & Gipps, 1998).

Yet another way in which teachers expanded the construct is by foregrounding the value of assessment in the real world. As noted in an earlier section, Banyan High had a much more expanded view of the oral construct, which included aspects of paralinguistic skills such as body language, eye contact or working together in groups, responding to others in a discussion mode, how students built on one another’s knowledge, and not just pronunciation, fluency and clear and accurate

communication that the O-Level examination required. Moreover, a variety of oral tasks or “speech acts” was seen to be important by Banyan High to prepare them for their leadership roles in later life and there were ample opportunities for these skills to be assessed in an authentic context individually and in groups.

This expansion of the oral construct is consistent with the social-interactive dimensions of communication (McNamara, 2001; Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; McNamara & Roever, 2006).

Another example of the expansion of construct arising from real world consequences or experiences can be seen in summary writing. Summary writing was marked using the O-Level rubrics at the end-of-year assessments for accountability purposes. However, students at Banyan High were asked to summarise articles that they themselves had chosen for their Reading and Response assessment task for the continual assessments. The fact that the summary was not marked by a pre-determined number of points and was based on authentic texts chosen by students is a radical departure from the practices in mainstream schools. However, as discussed earlier, the choice of different passages meant that teachers had to contend with issues of score comparability and a higher workload.

One area which the teacher-participants did not highlight in their practices relates to critical literacy, which is of interest given the prominence of this particular theoretical perspective in the literacy field (Wyatt-Smith, 2000). Perhaps, given the widely agreed view that certain topics require greater sensitivity, especially so in schools, teacher-participants might have felt more comfortable avoiding such topics and might have even regarded the theoretical perspective on critical literacy as not a useful one in their local practice.

## **6 Conclusion**

In summary, the teachers in the two participating schools demonstrate that the design and implementation of the IP have encouraged them to aim higher to meet the EL learning needs of their highly able students. They did so by expanding their language learning and assessment constructs by (1) paying greater attention to culture, (2) building on an extended understanding of genres, (3) giving increased importance to content knowledge, and (4) placing a stronger emphasis on higher-order thinking, learning, and communicating in authentic contexts.

While these four areas are drawn from the distinctive educational context of the IP, they serve to illuminate and illustrate how EL teachers can develop their assessment literacy to expand beyond the assessment constructs examined in high stakes tests to enhance students’ learning in their own local contexts. This direction is especially relevant given the strong commitment given to AfL and broader language learning

outcomes espoused in contemporary EL curricula. It is critical for teachers to interpret and manage assessment issues in their own contexts to achieve the deep understanding and commitment that will sustain their journey of assessment reform to achieve better student learning outcomes.

The findings also show that innovative school-based assessment is possible in an educational system even where an external authority has had such a long-standing influence on school assessment practices, provided that there is a highly supportive policy context that values and facilitates teachers' professional autonomy. Policymakers should be made aware of the intricacy of teacher-based assessment processes so that they can take them into account when advocating AfL – a point made by Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt (2009) as well.

This study has demonstrated that, under the right conditions, teachers are able to take greater responsibility for assessment choices in their classroom and equip themselves to carry out assessment practices that best serve their learners in their local contexts. They therefore need to be given the autonomy and the space to teach and assess, and to learn from their experiences.

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