CEFR-aligned school-based assessment in the Malaysian primary ESL classroom

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ABSTRACT
The Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) curriculum has undergone several reforms since the implementation of the *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025*. In 2016, the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) or the *Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools* (SBCPS), first introduced in 2011, was revised to align with the *Common European Framework of References* (CEFR) for languages. This more action-oriented approach resulted in fundamental changes to teaching, learning, and assessment including the integration of an innovative *school-based assessment* (SBA). It witnessed a shift from the traditional stance of assessment of learning to assessment for learning that emphasizes both peer and self-assessment as necessary components for the development of autonomous language learners. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to investigate the implementation of the CEFR-aligned SBA in the primary ESL classroom. Data were collected via a three-pronged procedure involving surveys, interviews, and document analysis from TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) teachers in five randomly-selected schools located in Damansara, Malaysia. The findings revealed that the implementation of SBA left much to be desired and was far from formative assessment. Though teachers expressed rather positive opinions on SBA, they lacked a full understanding of the method and admitted possessing a limited knowledge of the revised CEFR-aligned ESL curriculum altogether. Teachers provided little or no constructive feedback on assignments, and learners were not encouraged to reflect on assignments. There was little evidence of peer and self-assessment required for developing autonomous learners. Teachers cited time constraints, classroom enrolment, heavy workload, and lack of training as their main challenges against the effective implementation of the CEFR-aligned SBA.

Keywords: Curriculum innovation; ESL classroom; formative assessment; school-based assessment;

INTRODUCTION
Concern about the effectiveness of assessing student ability continues to garner tremendous attention in education systems worldwide. In the past decade, Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) providers have shifted from a more traditional summative assessment testing culture towards a more formative assessment that allows teachers to monitor and chart student learning and achievement (Ong, 2010; Othman, Salleh & Md. Norani, 2013). In 2016, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia implemented a synergistic assessment system under the *Common European Framework of References* (CEFR)-aligned ESL curriculum which combines both formative

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assessment and summative assessment under the umbrella construct of *school-based assessment* (SBA, hereafter) in order to improve the teaching and learning process in public schools.

In the Malaysian educational context, English is designated as the second official language and is therefore, seen as important to master. English in Malaysia is a necessity for the business, entertainment, information technology, and science sectors of the economy and is the international language of the Internet. The *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025* emphasizes the importance of this language in schools and introduces many innovative teaching and learning strategies to enhance students' English proficiency.

In Malaysia, SBA is a broad concept underpinned by a holistic approach in which the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains are equally assessed. SBA is viewed as a transformative approach to assessment practices in Malaysian primary and secondary schools. As reported in Ong's (2010) study on the assessment profile of Malaysia, two modes of SBA had been implemented in schools in the last ten years: monthly and end-of-term summative tests carried out by teachers in schools without reference to official standards imposed by the *Malaysian Education Syndicate* (MES), and trials or mock examinations carried out in schools to prepare students for high-stakes examinations. Ong (2010) also observed that in 1997 *continuous school-based assessment* (*CSBA*) was introduced at the lower and upper secondary levels for a few subjects such as Geography, History, Integrated Skills, and Science. At the Secondary Five level (equivalent to Year 11), CSBA includes a pure science practicum and school-based oral assessment for both Malay and English.

In 2011, the Malaysian Ministry of Education, launched a new curriculum reform referred to as *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) or the *Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools* (SCPS). This curriculum innovation set national standards and performance levels for all primary school subjects including ESL. Under the KSSR, the four language skills of the ESL syllabus were organized in a modular structure with a few new aspects including the phonics approach for basic literacy, penmanship, language arts, and an emphasis on critical and creative thinking skills (CCTS) especially higher order thinking skills (Ministry of Education, 2011). In addition to moving towards a more learner-centered approach, the KSSR Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) also emphasized the "4Cs" (communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration) of 21st century learning. Redecker & Johannessen (2013) pointed out the need to not only assess skills and competencies needed for the 21st century learner, but to also shift the paradigm towards more e-assessment using Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools.

The SBELC was recently revised in 2016 to align with the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for Languages in order to set internationally accepted standards tailored to meet the specific needs of Malaysia. This curriculum reform adopted the CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2) as a guiding framework for curriculum development; teaching and learning (including learning materials); and assessment. Its most innovative feature was the action-oriented approach which brought curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment into a closer interaction by including the use of "*I can / can do*" descriptor statements to specify a learning outcome, a learning focus, or imply an assessment task (Little, 2013).

A corresponding change was also witnessed in assessment under the newly revised CEFR-aligned SBELC. The SBA required teachers to assess their students' formative language proficiency (all four language skills) with a score of 1 to 6, from weak to advanced learning respectively. The summative component (central assessment) on the other hand reported past learning achievement of the students. Hence, the formative and summative components complemented each other in providing a more realistic estimate of students' overall achievement (Ong, 2010).

Little (2013) emphasized that the CEFR-aligned primary school ESL curriculum is one that fosters learner autonomy through a "democratization" of second language (L2). With this approach, ESL learners are guided by teachers to self-assess themselves so that they are capable of taking more responsibility for their own language learning. Teachers provide the necessary guidance and scaffolding to help their ESL learners identify learning targets, monitor progress, and encourage self-assessment.

Little (2013) advocated the use of self-assessment tools like the *Language Passport*, *Language Biography*, and *Dossier* to support learners' goal-setting, monitoring, and self-assessment. The Language Passport is used to summarize the ESL learner's linguistic identity and experiences in L2 and must be updated periodically against the CEFR self-assessment grid. The Language Biography is a collection of the ESL learner's use of L2 and reflection sheets on learning styles, learning strategies, and other intercultural experiences based on checklists of "*I can*" descriptors scaled to the CEFR levels. Finally, portfolios or dossiers provide evidence of ESL learner's experiences, L2 proficiency, and other works in-progress.

The main goals of the CEFR-aligned SBA include:
- working towards a new assessment culture in which summative assessments (external tests and exams) can co-exist on a continuum with formative school-based assessment, peer assessment, and learner self-assessment;
- utilizing assessment tools for both summative assessment and formative assessment informed by the CEFR's understanding of language learning as language use;
- ensuring assessment tasks are continuous and shape the learning environment based on the CEFR action-oriented approach ("I can" statements); and

- supporting and informing exploration by using rating criteria that are continuous with the reflective processes by which the implications of descriptors are explored.

The CEFR-aligned ESL primary school curriculum reform has put an innovative assessment system in place. Its formative SBA works hand-in-hand with summative assessment emphasizing the importance of learner autonomy for enhanced language learning.

Education experts all agree that assessment is an essential component of the teaching and learning process. For example, Darling-Hammond (2012) views assessment primarily as a measure of the effectiveness of student learning and progress. Boud and Molloy (2013) add that teachers need to focus on strategies that provide effective feedback processes to meet students' needs and make learning more engaging. Redecker & Johannessen (2013) note that 21st century classrooms have witnessed a corresponding move from "assessment of learning" to "assessment for learning" and "assessment as learning." The traditional assessment "of" learning is used to assess student achievement against outcomes and standards to rank or grade students. On the other hand, assessment "for" learning occurs throughout the teaching and learning process, and informs both parties (teacher and learner) of a student's strengths, the limitations of the learning experience, and how to improve (Nicole and Macfarlane-Dick, 2007). It also involves using evidence of student knowledge, learning, and skills to inform teachers' instructional practices. Assessment "as" learning occurs when students take responsibility for their own learning and become their own assessors, leading to autonomous language learning. Students work collaboratively with the teacher to set learning goals, monitor their own learning experience, make decisions on what they know and can do, and determine how best to use assessment to enhance their own learning (Burke, 2010).

Many other meta analyses in the field of language assessment have supported the stance that formative SBA assessments are effective in assisting student learning if effectively implemented in inquiry-based and problem-based learning (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Grob, Holmeier, & Labudde, 2017; Weiss & Belland, 2016). The processes involved in formative assessments are collaborative between teachers and students and both information about the students' level of knowledge or performance and information about their strengths and areas of improvement allow the teacher to plan subsequent instruction and the student to adapt his or her learning (Cizek, 2010).

While these approaches are well instituted in some educational contexts, teachers continue to question if they are indeed widely-used and implemented without too much difficulty or disruption to normal teaching. This is why in some countries, including Malaysia, a blend of both summative and formative assessments is seen by the teaching community as being more valuable

to the overall assessment framework. (Ong, 2010). Increasingly, such initiatives are helping to foster better links between national education policy and the classroom level to handle the complexity of different purposes for and methods of assessment. Some local studies have uncovered a lack of formative assessment skills or "literacy" among primary and secondary school teachers in Malaysia, and subsequent professional training has been suggested (Sidhu, Chan, & Azleena, 2011, Chan, Sidhu, & Yunus, 2009; Ong, 2010). Other studies have highlighted the possibilities of embedding technology in formative assessment design to overcome logistic barriers such as large classes with diverse students and extensive curriculum requirements (Redecker & Johannessen, 2013; Grob, Holmeier & Labudde, 2013; Weiss & Belland, 2016).

The above concerns have also been expressed and discussed in the media and within the Malaysian education system. As a result, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) highlighted the need to aid teachers in implementing assessment tasks that were aligned to the national curriculum. The SBA initiative under the 2016 CEFR-aligned ESL curriculum reform stressed the importance of formative assessment in primary schools and made available a range of strategies that teachers can use to elicit evidence of student learning and to shape subsequent instruction and learning based on this evidence. Consequently, training was provided to teachers in implementing formative assessment in the teaching and learning process.

Since its implementation in 2016, there has been scant empirical evidence on the implementation of the CEFR-aligned SBA in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to investigate the CEFR-aligned school-based assessment (SBA) in the Malaysian primary ESL classroom. More specifically, the study explored teachers' knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of the CEFR-aligned SBA. The study also examined the implementation of the SBA and the challenges that TESL teachers faced embracing the CEFR-aligned SBA in their ESL classroom.

METHOD

This study employed an exploratory study with a mixed methods approach, which allowed the researchers to describe not only the characteristics, but also the natural phenomenon and context of the setting. The study involved a total of five randomly selected public schools located in the suburban areas of Damansara in Selangor, Malaysia. The five schools in the study were referred to as School A, B, C, D and E. The population sample for the study consisted of English Language teachers from both lower and upper primary levels. A total of 55 teachers responded and were assigned numbers ranging from 1 to 55.

Data for the study were collected using a mixed methods approach that involved the use of a survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and document

analysis. Following Creswell (2014) a mixed method design provides one with a variety of perspectives on the phenomena being studied. Furthermore, it provides triangulation making the findings more valid and credible.

The questionnaire used in the study had three sections. Section A comprised 20 True or False statements which examined teachers' knowledge and understanding of basic assessment and the CEFR-aligned school-based assessment. Section B explored teachers' perspectives of SBA based on a 4-point Likert scale of 1 to 4 where a score of 1 reflected strong disagreement whilst a score of 4 indicated a strong agreement. Section C consisted of open and close ended questions designed to investigate the formative assessment tools used in the ESL classroom and the challenges that teachers faced in implementing SBA. The validity of the questionnaire was established by a panel of three experts – two TESL lecturers and one research methodology expert from a local university in Malaysia. The reliability was established through a pilot study conducted with 30 teachers from another district in Selangor. The overall reliability of the questionnaire based on the Cronbach Alpha score was 0.832.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two TESL teachers from each school, one from the lower primary level and one from the upper primary level. A total of 10 teachers were interviewed. The interviews helped the researcher triangulate data obtained from the survey instrument. Further triangulation was conducted via document analysis. Here, the researchers looked into the formative assessment assignments conducted over a six-month period of 4 students from each school. Hence a total of 20 students' formative assignments were examined

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed employing both descriptive and inferential statistics using the SPSS (version 20). The qualitative data were thematically examined using both deductive and inductive analysis. The analysis was based on the Braun and Clarke (2006) approach to using the two levels of semantic and latent analysis. First, semantic themes were identified via surface messages put forth by the teachers. Once the main themes had been identified, latent level analysis was conducted to look beyond the message communicated to the researchers. Finally, document analysis was conducted using a checklist which explored the type of SBA assessments, the frequency and duration of assignments, and the type of feedback provided for formative learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The data were cross-checked to triangulate answers to the four main research questions posed in this study:

- What is the teachers' knowledge and understanding of the CEFR-aligned SBA?
- What are the teachers' perceptions of SBA?
- How is SBA implemented in the primary ESL classroom?
- What are the challenges faced by the teachers in implementing SBA?

Demographic profile of respondents
Out of the 55 teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 13 (23.6%) were male and 42 (75.4%) were female. In terms of age, 22 (40%) of the respondents were below 30 years old whereas the remaining 33 (60%) were above the age of 30. Moreover, 65.5% (36) of the respondents had less than 10 years of teaching experience. Out of the 55 respondents, nine (16.4%) possessed a Diploma, 42 (76.4%) had a graduate degree, and four (7.3%) possessed a Masters' postgraduate degree. Only 18 (32.7%) had undergone some form of training and exposure to SBA. The remaining 37 (67.3%) were untrained in the assessment method.

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of CEFR-aligned SBA
The first research objective of the study was to investigate teachers' knowledge and understanding of SBA driven by the CEFR-aligned ESL curriculum reform. In Section A of the questionnaire, participants were required to read 20 statements on assessments and SBA and decide whether the statements were correct or incorrect.

The results, presented in Table 1, reveal that the teachers' overall knowledge and understanding of the method was moderate (61.3%), and that they had a very good understanding (83.7%) of assessment terms such as formative assessment and summative assessment, testing, and evaluation. They also demonstrated a fairly good knowledge and understanding of formative assessment (63.2%). Most teachers knew that formative assessment is an ongoing process designed to provide feedback for student learning (94.5%) and that it includes assessments such as oral questioning of the class (92.7%). Nevertheless, a large majority (81.8%) of the teachers were not aware of the fact that formative assessments can also be used to evaluate student learning at the end of a learning topic / unit.

Table 1. Participants' knowledge and understanding of assessment

Items	Correct	Incorrect
Terms used in SBA	83.7%	16.3%
Assessment methods under CEFR-aligned KSSR Curriculum	45.5%	45.5%
Formative assessment under SBA	63.2%	36.8%
Types of assessment & assessment tools	52.7%	47.3%
Overall average	**61.3%**	**38.7%**

Teachers, however, displayed a limited knowledge and understanding of assessment standards under the CEFR-aligned KSSR curriculum (45.5 2%) and the types of assessments (52.7%) used in SBA. Though teachers were fully aware of the fact that high-stakes assessments are used for the purposes of accountability (80%), a majority of them (56.8%) were not aware that student performance is a reflection on instructional practices. They also displayed a lack of knowledge about differentiated instruction—a majority (65%) felt that only one type of formative assessment tool must be used to grade all pupils. A majority (69.1%) of the teachers did not have a good understanding of the purpose of norm-referenced assessments. Likewise, a large majority (74.5%) of the teachers did not know the purpose of criterion-referencing assessment. They also displayed rather limited knowledge of the use of ICT tools for assessment (48%).

The results show that teachers in this study did not exhibit the confidence needed to possess a good understanding of CEFR-aligned SBA. Similar findings were also documented by studies of primary school teachers conducted by Othman, Salleh & Md. Norani (2013) and of secondary school teachers by Sidhu, Chan, & Azleena (2011). Moreover, the findings indicate that a moderate to limited understanding can affect the effective implementation of the CEFR-aligned KSSR curriculum in the ESL classroom. Research suggests that teachers who have a good understanding of subject content can be coached to embed formative assessment in their long-term and short-term planning (Cizek, 2010). Teachers with a good knowledge of assessment techniques can better choose relevant foci for feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013), handle self- and peer feedback, and encourage students' use of the feedback (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Teachers' perceptions of formative assessment in SBA

The second aspect explored was teachers' perceptions of formative SBA driven by the CEFR-aligned ESL curriculum reform. Here participants responded to 20 items based on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Most of the items were obtained from a manual on school-based assessment (SBA) prepared by the Curriculum Development Division (CDD) of the Malaysian Ministry of Education which categorized formative assessment into four subheadings: Objectives of Formative Assessment, Pre-administration of Formative Assessment, Implementation of Formative Assessment, and Post-administration of Formative Assessment.

The findings displayed in Table 2 indicated that the teachers held rather positive views on formative assessment (M = 3.0, SD = 0.597). Further in-depth inferential statistics conducted showed that there were no significant differences regarding teachers' perceptions of formative assessment based on demographic variables of age, teaching experience and training. However, this statistical result did reveal a

significant difference between age and teachers' perceptions of the objectives of formative assessment. Teachers above the age of 30 held slightly better opinions (M = 3.16) compared to their younger counterparts (M = 2.80). The *p* score of this construct was 0.022 which is less than 0.05.

On the other hand, rather low agreement levels were recorded for the pre-administration of formative assessment (M= 2.88, SD=0.616) and the implementation of formative assessment (M= 2.98, SD=0.589). They held rather positive views of most items except for Item 6, which highlighted that it is not necessary for all lessons to include formative assessments. Their score indicated that teachers are on the right track as formative assessment often supports learning during the learning process and provides meaningful homework assignments at the end of a learning period (Dodge, 2018).

Responses to Item 9, that self-regulation of learning is part of formative assessment (M = 2.55, SD = 0.715), indicated that some of them may not have a good understanding of self-regulated learning, a necessary component of learner autonomy as promoted by the CEFR-aligned SBA. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2007) point out the process of formative assessment and feedback can help students take control of their own learning and become self-regulated learners.

A mean score of 3.19 was recorded for teachers' perception of post-administration of formative assessment, indicating that teachers were well aware of what to do after conducting an assessment. They knew that formative SBA required them to investigate why students succeed or fail on an assessment or activity (M = 3.25, SD = 0.584) and then offer ongoing and appropriate feedback to the students (M = 3.31, SD = 0.505). These opinions were also reflected in the interviews. Teacher D observed that under SBA "teachers can conduct many types of assessments and each assessment helps us better understand the strengths and weakness of our pupils." Teacher E elaborated:

> School based assessment is formative and I think a teacher can intervene quickly when they see a pupil slacking or deteriorating . . . or not understanding a certain topic well . . . for example if I give an oral quiz in class I can quickly see how many of my pupils understood the lesson well and how many did not . . . then I know what to do for the next English lesson.

The final part of Section B of the questionnaire focused on the tools that can be used during the implementation of formative assessment such as observation, questioning, exit slips, portfolios, and even technological tools. The mean score for this section was 3.02, showing that most of the participants agreed to the items in this section and were aware of formative assessment tools that could be used under the SBA. They agreed that observation and questioning could be

conducted at the same time, and formative assessment tools like the portfolio could help trace pupils' performance over a period of time.

However, teachers were not accustomed to using exit slips as a means to obtain feedback over a period of time, as highlighted during the interview sessions. Eight out of the ten teachers interviewed were unaware of the use of exit slips. When informed about them, both Teachers H and J were excited and admitted it would be a good way to get feedback. "Well I hope to use it more often in my class . . . it is such an interesting way to get feedback on the day's lesson. I will surely use it in the future," added an enthusiastic Teacher J.

Table 2. Participants' perceptions of formative assessment

Objectives of Formative Assessment		Mean	SD
1	Formative assessment provides constant feedback on students' learning progress.	3.31	.466
2	Formative assessment does not focus on whether a learning goal was accomplished.	2.64	.729
3	Formative assessment provides opportunities for students to re-evaluate their understanding of the content.	3.31	.540
4	Formative assessment is not outcome based.	2.53	.663
Total Mean Score		**2.94**	**.600**
Pre-administration of Formative Assessment			
5	Teachers need to pre-assess skill level or knowledge before beginning a unit or chapter.	3.22	.658
6	It is not necessary for all lessons to include formative assessments.	2.20	.730
7	Differentiated instructions should be planned based on evidence of student learning.	3.22	.459
Total Mean Score		**2.88**	**.616**
Implementation of Formative Assessment			
8	Activating students as instructional resources for each other is part of formative assessment.	3.11	.497
9	Self-regulation of learning is part of formative assessment.	2.55	.715
10	Students should ask questions and offer peer feedback during instruction.	3.09	.586
11	Teachers need to offer feedback to all students immediately for each assessment given.	3.15	.558
Total Mean Score		**2.98**	**.589**
Post-administration of Formative Assessment			
12	Teachers need to try to understand why students succeed or fail on an assessment or activity.	3.25	.584
13	Teachers should offer ongoing and appropriate feedback to the students.	3.31	.505
14	Teachers should reflect on multiple student data before drawing academic or social conclusions about a students' progress.	3.18	.641
15	Students need to gather evidence for their own learning.	3.02	.593
Total Mean Score		**3.19**	**.581**
Tools of Formative Assessment			
16	Observation and questioning can be conducted at the same time.	3.09	.442
17	Teachers should implement the KWL (Know, Want to know, Learned) chart after every lesson.	3.07	.716
18	Exit slips are a good way to obtain feedback on a lesson.	2.91	.646
19	Portfolios help to trace pupils' performance over a period of time.	3.16	.501
20	I-think maps and Venn diagrams are good forms of formative assessments.	2.87	.695
Total Mean Score		**3.02**	**.600**
Total		**3.00**	**.597**

(Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree)

The above positive response and attitude towards formative SBA assessment was corroborated during the interview sessions. All ten teachers agreed that formative SBA was the way forward and in line with current trends in teaching and learning. They recognized the benefits of SBA. Teacher A observed: "School-based assessment is formative and . . . I feel that it is not a formal assessment and so there is less pressure on the pupils and the teacher." She added that, "pupils are not pressured because they know that is it not a one-off thing and even if they do not do well they can try again."

Teachers B, H, and F added that SBA will help teachers chart the progress of students' learning. "We can keep track on the progress of the children, their abilities," said Teacher B. "It allows early detection for pupils' performance, it also provides an indicator" continued Teacher H. Teacher G agreed that formative assessment is a "platform to observe students'

understanding on the knowledge learned;" and Teacher F said that formative assessments are "definitely better for grading a student because (teachers) can see how an individual student is doing." Teacher B reiterated that formative assessments "provide information needed to adjust teaching and learning while they are still happening." This is crucial in the classroom environment as teachers need constant feedback in order to effectively improve their teaching practices.

The teachers were also asked about how their pupils responded to formative assessment. All ten indicated that their pupils were rather receptive to the idea overall, and that a majority embraced the idea of formative assessments as part and parcel of the teaching and learning process. Teacher F highlighted that some students found it challenging, were "more reluctant, and seemed to be forced to take part in the oral quiz." However, most of the teachers agreed that their students enjoyed formative assessments and found the idea

exciting and fun. Teacher D believed students were able to improve because of the implementation of formative assessment. "Weak students who initially were reluctant to participate are more willing to try now. Proficient ones are progressing much faster, but require constant feedback."

When formative assessment is integrated into teachers' classroom practice, it becomes an effective way to measure student performance. When teaching subject content, formative assessment allows teachers to adapt instruction based on results, making modifications and improvements that will produce immediate benefits for student learning (Cizek, 2010). Teachers can give students evidence of their current progress to actively manage and adjust their own learning, enabling them to track their own educational goals (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Implementation of SBA in the ESL classroom

The third research objective explored the implementation of SBA in the ESL classroom. Data were obtained from two main sources: document analysis using a checklist and interviews with teachers. First, we analyzed the types of tools teachers used to document formative assessments conducted in their ESL classrooms. These included students' homework assignments, scrap books, portfolios, and other tangible documents such as posters and teachers' record books and mark sheets (Table 3). The findings recorded in Table 3 show that teachers employed rather traditional tools and the overall feedback was far from constructive as a majority of them resorted to giving grades and marks. None of them gave feedback based on ESL performance standards postulated under the new revised KSSR ESL syllabus

Table 3. Participants' use of assessment tools in SBA

Teacher	Types of assessment tools	Frequency of take home and classroom SBA activities	Type of feedback
Teacher A	Worksheets, portfolio, mind maps	Approx. 2x a week	Grade & marks
Teacher B	Worksheets, observation sheet	Approx. 1x a week	Grade only
Teacher C	Worksheets, quizzes, scarp book, I-think maps, Frog VLE	Approx. 2x a week	Grade & marks peer evaluation
Teacher D	Worksheets, quizzes, observation sheet	Approx. 2x a week	Grade only
Teacher E	Worksheets, quizzes, portfolio, posters, observation sheet, feedback slips, checklists, mind maps, i-think maps	Approx. 3x a week	Grade, marks, peer evaluation and written feedback
Teacher F	Worksheets, scarp book	Approx. 1x a week	Grade & marks
Teacher G	Worksheets, scarp book	Approx. 2x a week	Grade & marks
Teacher H	Worksheets, portfolio, Checklists	Approx. 3x a week	Grade & marks peer evaluation
Teacher I	Worksheets, scrap book	Approx. 2x a week	Grade & marks
Teacher J	Worksheets only	Approx. 1x a week	Grade & marks

The ten teachers interviewed placed heavy emphasis on such traditional assessment tools such as worksheets and quizzes. Findings indicated that teachers seldom encouraged peer assessment and self-assessment that has been postulated by the CEFR-aligned ESL curriculum for the development of learner autonomy. Portfolio analyses revealed little charting of progress of each ESL learner. Most portfolios were comprised of an array of classroom worksheets which provided little evidence of peer assessment and no self-assessments. A few teachers were more innovative and used scrap books and portfolios containing more interesting activities, such as reflection sheets and simple questionnaires. Out of the ten teachers, only Teacher E's assessment tools displayed work that encouraged pupils' creativity and innovation. She had her students draw and design greeting cards, write their own rhymes, and design posters. Her pupils' portfolios displayed activities in all four language skills and were "alive"- they spoke volumes about how the students were progressing.

The above findings were also corroborated during the interview session as teachers were asked about the

kind of tools they used in SBA. A majority of the ten teachers indicated that the most popular choices for formative assessment tools were worksheets and quizzes, both in the oral and written forms. Approximately 50% answered they also used observation and feedback sheets, while only 30% mentioned group activities such as group discussion, role plays, games, and so on.

When questioned about the use of technology or web-based formative tools, the interviews revealed that only three out of the ten, or 30% of the teachers (A, C, and E), were knowledgeable and often used technology and web-based assessment tools like I-think maps, Frog VLE, and slide presentations. Teachers A and C reported using web-based tools such as Kahoot, Survey Monkey, Quizlet, and Google Forms in their classrooms. Teacher E explained:

my pupils love it and they look forward to learning via web based tools… I am still learning and I hope to use more web based assessments in my English classes but I always have problems with

wi-fi and I hope school authorities will look into that.

Redecker & Johannessen (2013) note that various recent studies have shown that the way forward is e-assessment using ICT tools. Today's tools for computer assisted assessment have shifted from Generation 1 and 2, which centered on testing using ICT, to more mature Generations 3 and 4 that can integrate holistic and personalized learning under SBA into their platforms. Therefore, teachers today should embrace ICT for e-assessment.

Findings also indicated that teachers seldom encouraged peer and self-assessment that has been postulated by the CEFR-aligned ESL curriculum for the development of learner autonomy. The portfolio analyses also revealed little charting of progress of each ESL learner. These portfolios comprised an array of classroom worksheet which provided little evidence of peer assessment and no self-assessments.

Probing further, teachers were asked to talk about the types of English Language SBA activities that they conducted with regards to the four skills. The findings from the interviews are presented in Table 4. The findings revealed that teachers conducted some listening activities but these were usually presented as worksheets. Moreover, the listening activities were minimal (approximately 10%) compared to worksheets on reading comprehension and writing. The document analysis also did not reveal any evidence of speaking activities. In the interview sessions, teachers reported conducting oral activities in class, but seldom graded speaking activities as school-based assessments. One of the reasons cited was that they found such activities difficult to grade. Teacher F explained, "Though I carry out some speaking activities on an individual basis, I find it difficult to grade as I do not think we have a good grading system for speaking in my school." Teacher G also admitted that she found it difficult to grade group work and role play activities.

Table 4. SBA language activities conducted by teachers

Listening activities	Speaking activities	Reading activities	Writing activities
• Listen and repeat words, phrases and sentences with correct stress and intonation • Listen and sing songs with actions • Listen to a talk/ passage and answer some MCQ questions / fill in the blanks • Listen to texts and provide oral and written responses	• Oral question and answer sessions during lessons • Read aloud sentences with correct pronunciation, stress and intonation • Read and retell stories using own words • Reading aloud paragraphs from reading text • Talk about a topic of interest / topic • Group discussions • Role play	• Read and match • Read and fill in the blanks • Read and answer MCQs • Read and transfer information from non-linear to liner texts and vice versa • Read and answer short structured questions • Read and write a short response.	• Read and match • Read and fill in the blank • Read and answer MCQs • Read and transfer information from non-linear to liner texts and vice versa • Read and answer short structured questions • Read and write a short response

Document analysis showed that most formative assessments (75%) were focused on developing reading comprehension skills. The assessments indicated that pupils were required to read a variety of texts such as cards, messages, dialogues, passages and stories. Interview sessions backed up evidence obtained from the document analysis. Teachers reported that they found reading comprehension activities the easiest to design and grade. Teacher A explained: "I have no problems preparing SBA for reading comprehension and most teachers are used to it . . . these assessments are also easy to get from textbooks and reference books." Teacher C added: "reading assessments are easy to grade and that is why we give many such formative school-based assessment ... it is also because we have many pupils in one class and we can grade all pupils in a short time compared to speaking assessments …we cannot waste time as we have to complete the language syllabus for the final examination."

Finally, evidence of written assessments were visible in pupils' exercise books, scrap books, and portfolios. All teachers reported that they had conducted various written exercises in formative assessment. Teachers A and B said they usually conduct formative written quizzes at least once a week, especially at the end of a unit. Teacher E's formative writing assessments included group projects like asking students to work together to make a scrapbook or poster that integrated grammar and vocabulary exercises.

The data presented in Table 3 demonstrate that some teachers (A, C, E, and H) conducted a variety of assessments. For example, Teacher E's SBA included worksheets, quizzes, portfolios, posters, observation sheets, feedback slips, checklists, mind maps, and I-Think maps. She explained:

[I am] always trying to make assessment fun and interesting . . . this way my pupils will not fear assessment and I hope they can see all these assessments as improving their learning of English . . . I want my pupils to love English because I think it is an important subject for them to master.

Another aspect explored in the implementation of SBA, was the frequency of school-based assessments. As illustrated in Table 3, all ten teachers conducted a minimum of two take-home formative assessment assignments per week. Teachers stressed that the frequency depended on a number of factors such as the type of learning experiences and the pupils' proficiency levels. Teacher F elaborated:

If pupils are learning a new topic for the week, I may only give them one take-home SBA for the week . . . if pupils are good and their English is good then I can give more SBA activities . . . so it actually depends on the topic and the pupils' proficiency level.

Teacher E and Teacher H probably give their pupils the most assessments in the greatest variety of forms. Teacher E further added,

Yes I do a lot of formative assessments activities with my pupils and I think this is important for them . . . because I believe in practice makes perfect . . . I also want them to enjoy doing the SBA and I think it does help them improve.

Likewise, Teacher H highlighted that it was her previous school's policy to give a minimum of three formative assessments per week and she has adhered to it.

The final aspect examined under the implementation of CEFR-aligned formative SBA was feedback. Findings from document analyses revealed that constructive and on-going feedback was hardly visible as there was no evidence on ongoing assignments and project work given to pupils. Moreover, there was no evidence of self-assessment and only two teachers made some attempt in encouraging peer assessment.

Findings in Table 3 show that the kind of feedback provided by all ten teachers centered on giving grades and marks. This is norm-referenced feedback as it ranks a pupil's performance in relation to other students. Interview sessions further confirmed these findings. Teacher B explained. "We have so many students in a class and I do not think we have time to give comments or constructive feedback to everyone." Teacher I concurred. "I feel my pupils are rather young as I teach

lower primary levels and I think my pupils may not understand written feedback beyond grades and numbers."

In contrast, Teacher C preferred verbal feedback for interactive assignments:

I usually give feedback for written assignments in grades and marks but classroom-based assessments such as speaking and role playing assessments I will tell my pupils what they did well and what they need to improve on.

Data from the document analysis indicated that Teacher E was the only one to shift from the traditional feedback. She made some attempt to provide written constructive feedback with comments such as ". . . good work . . . be careful of using punctuation marks such as question mark." Teachers H and E were the only ones who showed evidence of encouraging their pupils to peer evaluate

According to Bellon, Bellon & Blank (1991), academic feedback is very important as it is strongly and consistently related to academic achievement more than any other teaching behavior. They also stress that this relationship is consistent across all grades, socioeconomic status, races, and school settings. With every submission of students' work, teachers are required and expected to give feedback or reply in some way. This can be referred to as "corrective feedback." Data in this study also showed that though some teachers have made attempts to have peer evaluation, most did not encourage pupils to conduct refection and self-evaluation on their assessments. According to Sadler and Good (2006) peer evaluation and self-evaluation both help teachers save time, and improve pupils' metacognitive skills and understanding of their learning experiences.

Challenges faced by teachers in implementing CEFR-aligned SBA
The final research question explored the challenges teachers encountered when implementing formative assessment under the CEFR-aligned SBA. During the interview sessions the teachers stressed that although SBA has many benefits, they were not able to implement it effectively due to a few challenges. They highlighted their main concerns which are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Challenges in implementing CEFR-aligned SBA

Teacher workload	Time constraints	Class enrollment	Other challenges
• Minimum teaching load: Four ESL classes • Administrative duties • Co-curriculum responsibilities • Ad-hoc meetings at school, district and state educational levels	• Need to complete ESL syllabus before final exams • Too many assessments to conduct • Numerous school events and activities • Public holidays	• Large class size • Varied language ability and proficiency • Classroom management	• Lack of effective training on SBA • Lack of support from school administrators • Lack of teaching and learning materials and facilities • Lack of clear guidelines

All ten teachers cited heavy workload as one of their main challenges. Teachers B, D, F, G, and H pointed out that having to teach a minimum of four ESL classes coupled with the other administrative duties demanded a lot of work and documentation, leaving little time for effective teaching and implementation of SBA. Teacher C explained:

Besides teaching four classes of English, I am also the advisor of the English Language Society, Committee Member of the school discipline and curriculum board and this year I am the Sports Mistress for the Blue House . . . I know we have to conduct formative school-based assessments for all four skills but I admit I have not been able to do it effectively . . . I just do not have the time to chart the development and improvement for each pupil. I feel bad but I think all teachers will tell you the same . . . the schools should just let us teach and let us concentrate on this school-based assessment so we can help our pupils improve.

Teacher H agreed:

School-based assessment is very demanding as we have to do so much documentation and record the progress of each pupil and with so much assessment we have very little time for effective teaching .. that is why it cannot be well implemented in the school.

All the teachers also cited time constraints as another challenging factor. Due to heavy administrative and teaching responsibilities, Teacher C elaborated, "well we teachers often get sent for courses which eats into our teaching time and with little time, formative assessments becomes difficult . . . so many of us just do away with it." Teacher J chimed in:

There is so much to cover in the English syllabus and we have to complete the syllabus by late August and September to prepare pupils for the final examination . . . and that is why many of us do not do much formative assessment required under the SBA.

Another important factor impeding effective implementation of SBA in the ESL classroom referenced by all ten teachers was large class enrolments. This was made even more challenging as their ESL classroom comprised students with mixed abilities in terms of language ability and proficiency. Moreover, large class size consequently led to other related issues such as classroom management and effective monitoring of teaching and learning. Teacher H detailed the problem:

I teach four English classes and each class has approximately 35 to 40 pupils . . . So we are to conduct school-based assessment for each topic and try to assess every pupil for each topic. We

have no time to do a real good job because there are so many pupils. I tried once with a pair speaking assessment activity and it took me close to two weeks to complete assessing all the pupils in my class of 38 pupils and providing them feedback . . . it is too demanding and we lose a lot of time and we cannot teach effectively . . . yes I know formative assessment is good but I think it is not practical given our class size and not to mention the many different language proficiency levels in our mixed-ability classrooms.

The other challenges that the teachers cited included a lack of effective training and professional development. Teachers B, F and G also felt they needed more training and continuous professional development to enhance their implementation efforts. Teacher G pointed out that formative SBA requires differentiated instruction and she was not clear how to go about it.

I will admit I do not have a good understanding of CEFR or school-based assessment . . . everyone is talking about it but no one has actually showed me how to do it . . . how to integrate in my English class . . . also I do not understand this performance standards well . . . some training or in-house courses will help. (Teacher J)

Teachers also cited a lack of technological resources. Teacher E felt that SBA could be better implemented with more technologically enhanced ESL classrooms.

Today we talk about 21st century classrooms but our schools are not well equipped with technology . . . if we have few more computer labs for pupils I think formative school-based assessment for English will work . . . our language classrooms today are still very traditional so I do not think SBA is working well.

Finally, other challenges cited by the teachers included the lack of support from administrators and school heads and a lack of clear guidelines on the implementation of SBA in the ESL classroom.

The above challenges cited have also been articulated by other researchers such as Hamzah and Paramasivan (2017) who concluded that formative assessment imposed on schools was too onerous, leaving little time for effective teaching and learning. They also reiterated the challenge of time constraints and large class sizes. Brennan, Mallaburn, & Seaton (2018) also corroborated with the findings of this study that teachers support SBA, but they do not deny that its implementation is not without its share of challenges.

CONCLUSION
The implementation of the CEFR-aligned primary ESL syllabus is an innovative action-oriented curriculum approach that witnessed a corresponding change in

school-based formative assessment. It calls for a fundamental shift from the traditional stance of assessment of learning to assessment for learning with an emphasis on both peer assessment and self-assessment for the development of autonomous language learners. The results of this exploratory study indicated that while teachers held positive perceptions of this curriculum innovation, their practices revealed their inability to embrace the shift towards assessment for learning. They admitted possessing a limited understanding of the revised CEFR-aligned SBA and a preference to using traditional assessment tools. The findings further revealed that teachers were not providing constructive feedback on assignments based on performance standards identified under the revised CEFR-aligned ESL syllabus. Teachers cited a number of pedagogical challenges such as time constraints, classroom enrolment, heavy workload and lack of training that impeded the effective implementation of the CEFR-aligned SBA.

With the small sample size, the results are not representative of a broader community of primary ESL teachers in Malaysia. However, since the implementation of the CEFR-aligned SBA was trialled using a mixed methods approach, the triangulated results from this study provide some useful insights on what supportive measures are needed to better implement this curriculum innovation in schools. Besides raising teachers' knowledge on SBA and use of more creative and web-based assessment tools, there is also a need to strengthen the culture of formative assessment. This will help establish a classroom ethos that supports formative assessment based on clear learning goals and performance standards. This will help teachers to track student progress and encourage learner interaction using varied instruction methods to meet diverse student needs while providing continuous feedback on student performance.

Finally, it is pertinent to note that though the CEFR-aligned school-based assessment is not a 'silver bullet' to enhance student learning, there is no denying that this curriculum innovation has much to offer. Therefore, more research is needed to further explore the constraints faced by ESL teachers in bridging their knowledge between policy and practice.

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