

Teachers' Perception on Literacy, Numeracy and Screening (Linus2.0) Assessment Features Based On Year 1 Students' Performance

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ABSTRACT

Students' literacy is a growing concern among parents and educators as many Malaysian students are still unable to master the basic skills in reading and writing. Despite spending 6 years in primary school, many students are having difficulty with reading and writing once they enter the secondary school. Hence, to overcome the problem, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has come up with an educational intervention programme, the 'Literacy and Numeracy Screening' (LINUS) which was implemented in 2013. LINUS2.0 aims to enhance the rate of literacy in English Language among Malaysian lower primary ESL learners. As teachers play a significant role in its execution, their beliefs and perception is valuable to help realise the effectiveness of the programme's features. It examines teachers' perception towards the implementation of the programme, especially in terms of its assessment features. Preliminary data were gathered from two English Language teachers who were engaged in the programme through a semi-structured interview. The findings in this study suggest that the programme have some positive and negative effects to students' performance. On top of that, the findings also revealed some obstacle faced by teachers. Further improvement of the programme, in terms of its assessment features is also included in this paper.

KEYWORDS: LINUS, perception, new method- reading skills, and writing skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Literacy among children is a major concern expressed by the government, teachers and parents. It is a continuous process that involves more than blending phonemes, recognizing the words' meanings and their uses. Children who are solid readers perform better in school, have a healthy self-image, and become lifelong learners; qualities that are essential for the competitive world today.

One of the Ministry Key Performance Indicator (MKPI) is to ensure that all pupils with no learning disabilities are able to master the basic skills of reading, writing and counting after attending three years of primary schooling at the end of 2012. According to a newspaper report (The Star, dated 5th September 2012), 'Kelas Intervensi Awal Membaca dan Menulis' (KIA2M) - or Early

Reading and Writing Intervention Class, its data in 2008 also showed that 54000 pupils in Year 1 failed to grasp the basic skills of literacy.

With that in mind, the Ministry of Education (MOE) had decided that detailed attentions should be given to tackle this problem as early as possible and screenings to be held to detect those who are not able to master the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. LINUS2.0 is the extension of the previous LINUS programme introduced in 2012 with the addition of English Literacy (LBI). Screening instruments for LINUS2.0 were designed based on twelve basic literacy and numeracy construct and items for each instrument are built based on the content depth.

As the LBI programme is the first English Language Literacy intervention initiative, the need to find out whether the screening has worked to achieve its objectives based on the pupils' performance is crucial. The findings later on would help to provide those involved in the education field, - be it the teachers, schools or MOE - with information such as problems regarding the screening, their reliability and how the screening process could be improved to accommodate future needs. This paper reports on the perceptions of teachers during the screening process in a school in Bangsar Zone, Kuala Lumpur.

The study aims to examine teacher's perceptions towards the constructs of LINUS2.0 in developing and assessing students' reading skills, their observations toward the students' performance throughout the screening and recommendations to improve the screening process. This study also aims to contribute to more studies on the programme as LINUS2.0 is still a new assessment and findings are important to give more insights on the assessment constructs to teachers and MOE. The main objective of this study is therefore to identify the reaction of teachers towards teaching the LINUS programme.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners will use the language either in daily life or in their formal situation as being literate in the language is very crucial. Recognizing the letter in alphabet creates an important matter as the learners who are able to have this skill will develop better achievement in their reading and motor skills (Gupta, 2013; Martin, Emfinger, Snyder and O'Neal, 2007; Cusumano, 2006, as cited in Angela 2010). It will help the teachers to be focused on the target group and suitable methodology in enhancing these literacy skills.

As mentioned by Gerde, Bingham and Wasik (2012), writing has been seen as a critical activity in the early childhood classroom as it is part of the literary skill that combines with the reading skills. It is in line with the purpose of having the LINUS2.0 programme which requires learners to master these skills. LINUS2.0 has been introduced due to the success of LINUS1.0 in illiterate issue of Malay Language and Mathematics (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2012).

It is stated by Tubah and Hamid (2011) that the LINUS programme is the continuation of the KIA2M programme which consists of twelve constructs to be achieved by the learners in the literacy skills. It also requires the teachers to guide the learners in mastering the skills and hence answering the constructs with the target accuracy. Being able to teach these learners, teachers have to guide them in the classroom although it is not stated in any research yet. Teachers have to come up with a special lesson plan to teach these learners with guidance from the Teacher's Module provided by the Ministry of Education (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2014).

Sight words play a major role in reading skills. As Calhoun, Poirier, Simon and Mueller (2001) stated based on the Picture Word Inductive Model, sight vocabulary is crucial to the literacy skills and with the help by phonetic and structural properties will encourage learners to enhance their input and output skills. Phonological aspects that contain rhyme and phoneme segmentation also help the learners to achieve success in the reading skill (Martin, Emfinger, Snyder and O'Neal, 2007). In the LINUS module, sight words can be seen everywhere as they are being introduced and repeated frequently to enhance memorization and automaticity.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

A case study approach was selected to address the aim of the study in determining teachers' perceptions towards the LINUS2.0 programme in terms of the constructs of assessment, whether or not LINUS2.0 has been successful in improving and assessing literacy abilities among Year 1 students' selected sample. The approach was considered suitable for measuring an event that has already taken place or currently is on progress towards its completion. The two teachers were purposively selected as they are currently involved in the programme. In such, we hope to explore their views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of the programme on a specific matter, such as its assessment's key constructs.

A semi-structured interview was carried out to collect data regarding the teachers' response for the study. The method is most suitable because it not only consists of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows us and the teachers to diverge in order to pursue the intended idea or response in a more detailed manner (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). The interview consists of 6 questions, which focused on the teachers' perception toward the key constructs of LINUS2.0 in its effectiveness of developing and assessing students' performance and reading skills during the programme. The data gathered were evaluated based on teachers' perception on students' performance, and the effectiveness of the programme based on its assessment's key constructs. Each interview lasted about 40 – 50 minutes.

Participants

Two English Language teachers and their pupils from Bangsar Zone were invited to participate in this study. Each teacher had 22 and 21 pupils respectively in their classrooms. The participants from this school were selected based on their current involvement in the programme. The school is located in the town area and both teachers involved in the programme have qualification in teaching English. Both of the teachers also have attended specific courses by the Ministry of Education related to the execution of the LINUS2.0 programme.

Data Analysis

The data of the study were analysed qualitatively. Feedbacks were gathered from semi – structured interviews administered to two teachers who had taught English in Year 1. Both data and feedback were analysed based on six qualities of test usefulness according to the framework proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996). These qualities of test usefulness will serve as a guideline to gauge feedback from the teachers on the usefulness of Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS2.0), in ensuring that all Malaysian children are able to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the semi-structured interviews were identified according to the objectives of this research which centred on whether the LINUS assessment was useful and effective towards improving the pupils' English literacy skills. Discussion of the results focuses on the qualities that determined its usefulness which are reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact and practicality.

Question 1

Is the practice of scoring in LINUS2.0 consistent between both screenings (Saringan 1 & Saringan2)?

The analysis of the data revealed that both teachers agreed that the scores for LINUS assessment is consistent to a certain extent. According to Arshad Abd Samad (2010), reliability is computed using some kind of correlation. This is an important aspect as in LINUS, pupils are to be assessed whether they will be in the mainstream group or placed in the remedial group. In this case, LINUS is reliable in terms of the two similar tests administered to the same sample of person, and its parallel forms reliability measure is protected as the same questions are not asked twice. Two screenings were done with the first one usually in March, known as Saringan 1 and another in September known as Saringan 2. These two screenings help the teachers to correlate the results hence ensuring that only weak pupils who failed to master all twelve constructs could receive English remedial lesson with differentiated instructions. This is evident in the voices of both teachers being interviewed as illustrated below:

Sample 1

"...some of the pupils who had passed all twelve construct previously, they had no problems with the second screenings...There are a few who show improvement...They did not pass the first one, but passed the second screening...hmm...Probably because using LINUS module... during lessons."

Sample 2

"...before this, my pupils could not answer the questions...During the first screening...Using modules to help them...after school programmes to help...the ones in LINUS group...hmm...their writing gets better...their readings also gets better."

Question 2

Do you agree that the test is a valid indicator for students' basic literacy English performance?

As for whether or not the LINUS assessment is a valid indicator for students' basic English literacy skills, both teachers also agreed. The questions in the test were created based on twelve constructs that emphasized on phonics, phonemes blending, segmenting, using language at word level, phrases, sentences and finally able to construct sentences.

Construct 1 : Able to identify and distinguish shapes of the letters of the alphabet

Construct 2 : Able to associate sounds with the letters of the alphabet

Construct 3 : Able to blend phonemes into recognizable words.

Construct 4 : Able to segment words into phonemes

Construct 5 : Able to understand and use the language at word level

Construct 6 : Able to participate in daily conversations using appropriate phrases

Construct 7 : Able to understand and use the language at phrase level in linear texts

Construct 8 : Able to understand and use the language at phrase level in non-linear texts Construct 9 : Able to read and understand sentences with guidance

Construct 10 : Able to understand and use the language at sentence level in non-linear texts Construct 11 : Able to understand and use the language at sentence level in linear texts

Construct 12 : Able to construct sentences with guidance

The same constructs were emphasized according to its difficulty and level in language. This is evident in the voices of both teachers being interviewed, as illustrated below.

Sample 1

"Yes, LINUS is valid I think...It uses the same constructs for screening one...screening two...Only the questions changed...First construct is about the letters, then the level increase into phonetics...and next blending...but some of my students only know how to sound the letters...Most of my students who cannot do the basic ones, cannot do the later construct too...So, those who had grasped all the construct had no problems...err...most of them do well I think. The construct was precisely well thought...It follows the level of difficulties in learning English."

Sample 2

"I agree... It is kind of valid...The tests start with minimal sounds which are phonics...Hmm...They learned to recognise the sounds and use them to create words...Then the constructs get more difficult...they start to recognize phrases, and sentences to master the language...Steps shown by us so that my pupils can answer them well... Pupils who already pass, they did not have problem in repeating the same procedure for the second

screening.”

Question 3

What do you think about the relationship between the skills tested for LINUS2.0 screening and what the students need to master in order to improve their English skills?

As for the authenticity of the LINUS assessment, both agreed that only writing and reading were tested and not covering all four major skills in English language which are listening and speaking. It is however noted that during the screening, teachers are required to guide the pupils as much as they can without giving direct answers. For example, during the assessment the teachers would read the instructions and showing how to answers the questions using almost similar questions. It is also noted that the teacher would be able to check the answers and correct them if there are any errors. In a real examination, these situations would not occur as there will be no teachers to help them. This is evident in the voices of both teachers being interviewed as illustrated below.

Sample 1

“In LINUS screening, only two skills which are reading and writing...It is good, but English language have more skills...They were not tested for speaking and listening...But I think that because this is for Year 1, the skills being tested are adequate...besides, only reading and writing are used in real life, you know when answering English questions...err...but, with real exams I will not be there to guide them when reading instructions...”

Sample 2

“...to master English, there are four skills which is listening, speaking, reading and writing...err...there is grammar as well, as the core of the language...the learners only answer the reading and writing parts, but the screening you know...also integrated listening and speaking skills as well...listen carefully to me before answering the questions...for reading constructs, my pupils need to have verbal skills...hmm...they required more efforts also from their parents...motivation and practice will work to make sure language being used.”

Question 4

Is the language used in the LINUS2.0 test's questions and instructions appropriate for the students' level?

In response to the question of the appropriateness of language used in LINUS2.0, both of the teachers' responses indicated that the language used in the test's instruction are simple, straight forward, clear and suitable for Year 1 students. The teachers emphasized on the questions and instructions for each construct are made short but clearly explain the tasks required of students. For an instance, the instruction for Construct 1 is as short as 'Read the letters aloud'. Apart from that, the teachers also add that the illustrations used in the instrument are also clear and can be identified instantly by students of Year 1. However, even the simplest instructions used seem difficult for students who are already illiterate and this is another challenge faced by the teachers. This is evident in the voices of both teachers being interviewed as illustrated below.

Sample 1

“The instructions in LINUS are simple...It can easily be understood by the teachers...definitely suitable for students... Only students are sometime confuse on the task to distinguish the letter and its' sound...So I just need to emphasize on the key parts of the instruction...Normally when I repeat the instruction 'Say the sound'...they got it...it takes time...”

Sample 2

“the language used in the test is clear and straightforward...I agree it is suitable for the level of the students...ermm but no matter how simple, it is still quite challenging...for those already illiterate students... but I am satisfied with the instructions in LINUS. It is overall good and suitable. The pictures also clear and suitable...”

Question 5

What would be the contribution of LINUS2.0 to society and Malaysian educational system?

In response to the question regarding the contribution of LINUS to the society and education system, both teachers emphasized on it being helpful. Parents could contribute towards a better learning experience for their children. They also pointed out that there were no remedial teachers provided for English Language, unlike Malay language and Mathematics. Thus, a better understanding with the pupil proficiency in language provided by the data collected during the screening also aid the teacher to provide more suitable lesson plan for them. National Key Result Areas (NKRA) is one of the efforts by the government and one of the programmes under it is LINUS. The results collected by NKRA for LINUS could also be use to produce better education programme for the pupils to increase their language proficiency. This is evident in the voices of both teachers being interviewed as illustrated below.

Sample 1

“...In Malay Language and Math, there are remedial teachers provided to help the pupils with learning how to

read and count...So, LINUS assessment helped the teachers to screen the students which in need of different method of learning compared to the mainstream students...More people also learned how to read and understand English better...Because the tests use was the same, we can also compare the results with other schools and share with them different teaching method...teaching aids.”

Sample 2

“Hmm...LINUS is a new program under NKRA...It still needs more research and efforts. The programme under NKRA is also to help improve the society... There were no remedial teachers for English Language, unlike Bahasa Malaysia and Math Not only teachers, but parents also could help the pupils to improve in the language.”

Question 6

What do you think of the implementation of the test? Are you happy or do you face any difficulties in terms of the administration of LINUS2.0?

When asked about their thoughts on the implementation of LINUS, both said that they are happy as it helps the pupils to improve in English. However, the teachers also suggested that improvement could be made by extending the time to cater to students' need and so there will be better focus on LINUS itself. One of them also suggested that the instruments for LINUS was very suitable and well planned to cater the pupils need. Generally, there are improvements that could be made in order to make the screening to be a better experience for the teachers and pupils, as illustrated in sample answers below.

Sample 1

“I am very happy that my pupils got better results for English. I think the instrument was perfect...Hmm, there are bit of problems when conducting the tests...err...The time is too short...I have a lot of pupils in my class...and to check their answers and give them guidance during the test individually are quite hard and tiring...Especially when the pupils in the class have problems in English...Wanting to teach the lesson, while at the same time conducting the tests...It was really hard.”

Sample 2

“I am happy that the government initiative with LINUS benefitted the pupils...They will have better grades...But there are bit of problems during the screening...Too much programmes at school, I don't have enough time to focus on LINUS...Maybe they can adjust the time to make them longer...Other teachers that I've met also agree with me...”

V. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, it is fair to say that both teachers equally share positive perception and acceptance towards the implementation of the LINUS programme. However, there are some suggestions to make the programme a better assessment tool for language literacy among students. As LINUS2.0 is still developing, the need to understand how the programme really contributes to students' performance and ability to acquire English is demanded. More insights on the weakness and strengths, practicality and reliability of the constructs are therefore necessary in order to enhance its effectiveness in measuring students' literacy at the early stage. For that reason, ample time needs to be provided for the programme to mature. MOE should not be too eager to get quick result thus disregarding its effectiveness as a measurement tool.

At the same time, the authorities need to be more understanding in the implementation of the programme. As a young programme, LINUS2.0 can be enhanced to better fit the objectives of its establishment. Hence, time is a crucial factor that needs to be considered as all parties involved including teachers, school authorities, students and the government need to prepare themselves to its constructs and implementation. Teachers need not be given extra workload or burden which can pressure them in assessment process. Teachers need sufficient time to understand how the programme works and how the assessment should be done without being pressured by unnecessary things.

Furthermore, teachers say there is a need to have more remedial teachers for English. This is important as the lack of teachers contribute to the extra workload for the current teachers. As a result, teachers might be under pressure. The sufficient number of teachers will help the assessment to be done in a more structured manner and teachers' psychological aspects can be controlled as not affecting the assessment of the test.

In addition, the authorities may consider appropriate constructs to be included in the assessment to ensure the core skills which are reading, writing, listening and speaking can be assessed without skewing to any particular skills. As the constructs in LINUS2.0 is reliable in assessing the targeted skills and provide solution to improve students' performance, the authorities may suggest new constructs to assess the other two skills which are listening and speaking. Hence, the programme will be able to provide a better measurement of students' overall literacy performance. This will make the LINUS2.0 a reliable test to assess language literacy by integrating the four core skills of English language.

All in all, it is recommended that more research on the area is conducted so as to provide more insights on how the programme is relevant to our context of education. This study is limited to only two teachers' perceptions. A bigger scale study which involves all the instructors and teachers who are responsible for this programme will provide more generalised findings. Hence, more appropriate measurements can be taken to make the programme a better literacy assessment tool.

VI. CONCLUSION

LINUS is the government's initiative in identifying early literacy and numeracy among students. The programme is further extended to LINUS2.0 as to emphasise on the English literacy. The implementation of LINUS2.0 to assess students' proficiency is perceived well by the selected teachers as LINUS2.0 can be referred as the benchmark to evaluate students' performance at the language, and to detect early literacy among them. Teachers agree that the constructs of the programme do provide measurements to their proficiency even though they do not cover all the four basic skills in English. The consistency of the scores attained through the two screenings (Saringan 1 & Saringan 2) help teachers to identify the weak and good students which help teachers to provide necessary support to assist the students with low proficiency. Teachers observe students' improvement in their performance as a valid indicator that LINUS2.0 is relevant to assess their language proficiency.

The acquisition of English language requires its users to be able to master the four basic skills. Teachers observe the improvement in students' performance at Saringan 2 compared to Saringan 1 as a positive feedback to how the constructs help students to improve their reading skills. The instructions used are simple, thus it assists students in answering the test. Even though so, teachers contend that the need to master the other skills can be ignored. Hence, teachers believe that there is an urgent need to include constructs that will be able to measure both skills.

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