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Challenges in using authentic assessment in 21st century ESL classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the challenges faced by excellent teachers in preparing for authentic assessment in their English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. This qualitative case study involving six excellent teachers was based on purposive sampling. Data sources in this study used classroom observation and a series of semi-structured interviews with the excellent teachers. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes from the codes gathered from the interviews and observations. Data showed that excellent teachers faced multiple challenges prior to preparing for authentic assessment. They have also been using variations of authentic assessment to help children in their learning besides accurate documentation and extensive reading from around the globe to equip themselves with the current knowledge. Since there is no clear guideline for teachers who practice authentic assessment in their classes, this study provided some insights on the preparations and the use of authentic assessment as part of their teaching and learning process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Quality teaching and learning are produced by quality teachers [1, 2]. Teachers around the world work hard daily to improve the level of learning of their pupils and upholding the education system. As for the value and appreciation of the teachers' work, various awards and recognition have been awarded to teachers [3]. One of the many awards for the recognition of outstanding teachers in Malaysia is the excellent teacher award. The title is awarded by the Malaysian Ministry of Education for teachers who perform exceptionally well in terms of academic and co-curricular achievement. They serve in national schools and are striving to improve teaching and learning in schools to produce better students.

The term excellent teacher [4-6] is interchangeably used as an exemplary teacher [7, 8] and also master teacher [1]. Excellent teachers can be defined as teachers who master the content knowledge, highly skilled, experts in their subject matter, very dedicated and highly motivated in delivering their duties, particularly in teaching and learning [9]. Ministry of Education Malaysia [10] in its Malaysia Education Blueprint also indicated that the master teachers' programme was designed to provide pathways to promote teachers' career development. Since its commencement in the year 1994, to date, there are 13,300 teachers who have been awarded as excellent teachers. Gibbs [11] elaborated that an excellent teacher creates and organizes learning experiences, provides feedback and responds to students' needs as well as continuously

refines his/her teaching practices. According to this definition, the role of excellent teachers is characterized by the constant feedback that they have given to their students to improve their learning experiences.

Figure 1 is adapted from Shepard [12] who illustrated that curriculum theories and classroom assessment theories have a significant link. Since cognitivist and constructivist theorists believe that intellectual abilities are socially and culturally developed and learners construct knowledge within a social context, it is very timely and apt to involve them in authentic assessment where social elements are an essential part of the assessment. This type of assessment is on-going and integrated with the instruction that takes place in the classroom.

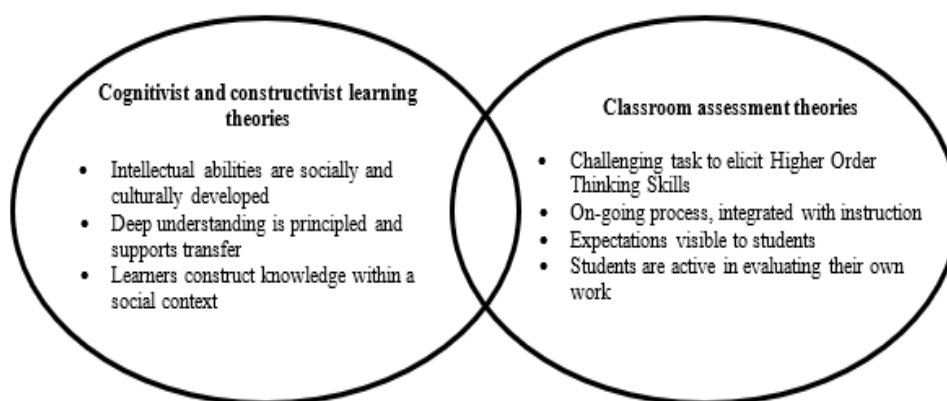


Figure 1. Shared principles in curriculum and assessment theories

Authentic assessment can best be defined as assessment activities that comprise replicas of that real professional world [13]. Through authentic assessment, learners are given the experience to practise real life problem solving skills, communication and critical thinking in addition to collaboration and networking. Based on the perspective of socio-cultural, authentic assessment provides learners a platform to learn together with their peers as it will encourage the development of the social aspect through active participation and deep learning [14]. This perspective is linked to the Theory of Social Development by Vygotsky where attributes like critical thinking, team-work, problem-solving, effective communication and reflective practice [15] are commonly employed in authentic assessment in the classroom. Koh [16] shed some light on the nature of authentic tasks which engage learners by working together with their peers in a socially supportive learning environment. Learning in this context varies from problem-based learning to learner-centred pedagogy. By means of working with and assessed by peers, learners are introduced to the concept of paralogy which means creating peer support, learning from each other and sharing ideas [17]. Apart from Vygotsky, the social-constructivist theory was instrumental in the shaping of 21st-century classroom assessment which results in the use of authentic assessment in the classroom.

As much as classroom assessment is concerned, excellent teachers go the extra mile to create an assessment that is interesting and more student-centred as possible. Thus, authentic assessment which is a form of assessment for learning [18], comes into the picture. Since authentic assessment is one of the approaches in alternative assessment, it reflects students' learning and accomplishment which moves in accordance with their motivations and attitudes [19]. As stated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013, teachers should adopt authentic assessment in their classroom teaching and learning activities. However, they are faced with challenges to accurately plan and carry out assessment activities in the classroom [20]. This is added to an already significant load of clerical works [21] that are preventing them from being able to give the best. Besides that, experienced teachers also have limited knowledge of authentic assessment even though it should be part of their assessment practices [22] resulting in them not being able to apply the best authentic assessment technique in the classroom [23]. The support of authentic assessment for the school administration is imperative [24] as it is a demanding task for excellent teachers to come up with various activities that embed authentic assessment in the classrooms. Correspondingly, this study aims to identify the challenges faced by the excellent teachers in preparing authentic assessment in the classroom and also to explore the preparation methods for authentic assessment in their classroom.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

In garnering data for this research, the views of six excellent teachers from six primary schools in a northern state in Malaysia were sought. A case study approach [25] using a qualitative paradigm was adopted for the data collection. Their views, ideas and feelings concerning the issue of authentic assessment were recorded in a series of semi-structured interviews after their individual lessons were observed for a period of two weeks each.

2.1. Sampling

Purposive sampling [26] was used in this research whereby the participants in this research were all excellent teachers who have been awarded by the Ministry of Education and highly recommended by their headmasters for their outstanding contribution and performance in and out of their respective schools. Besides that, the participants were also available and willing to contribute, communicate their experiences and professional opinions regarding the objective of this study [27]. Their names were suggested by the English Language officer in the education department as excellent teachers who practised innovations in their classrooms based on the awards they received for the past 3 years. They were also master trainers in various English language programmes in the state and had been actively involved in designing activities for Highly Immersive Program (HIP) which was the latest programme for schools involving the use of the English language. These excellent teachers had also been writing modules for the state and were practitioners of different kinds of assessment in their daily lessons as well as when conducting talks and seminars. Upon receiving permission from the education department, the researchers made an appointment with the school heads to meet the teachers in person. Prior to distributing consent letters to the excellent teachers, the researchers met with the school principals in a formal meeting and explained the research procedures. They clarified details about the participants of the research and the duration. The principals requested that no UPSR students were allowed to be involved in this study and this was agreed upon. After discussing the appropriate schedule for data collection, the teachers agreed to be observed for 10 lessons, which was essentially the time to complete a unit in the syllabus. Their uses of authentic assessment in their Year 5 classes were recorded in a non-participatory observation by the researchers.

2.2. Instrumentation and trustworthiness of the study

An interview protocol adapted from Ahmad and Mussawy [28] was used in this study; the interview questioned the teachers about their views and use of authentic assessment in the classroom. This instrument was piloted with another excellent teacher who was not the participant in this study. Some modifications were made on the instrument upon discussion with an expert in assessment [29] before it was used with the group of teachers in the main study. Apart from that, an observation protocol adapted from Ho [30] was used in this study to assist the researchers in capturing quotes and moments that should be recorded as data. The data were triangulated using two methods of data collection [31] which were the interview and observation to establish trustworthiness in this study. All the transcribed interviews were brought back to the participants to be member checked [32] and the content was verified to avoid misunderstanding and researcher bias. The profiles of the six participants are listed in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality and identity of the research participants [33].

Table 1. Profile of the participants

No.	Teachers' names	Profile	Post held in the school
1.	Madam Yana	An active teacher who is always bubbly and never fails to offer a smile every time we meet. She has been awarded various innovation awards at district and state levels for her creative works on reading materials for struggling pupils. She is an examiner for Primary School Assessment (U.P.S.R.) and has ample tips on tackling the papers for the children. She uses songs as her set induction daily to grab the attention of her pupils. They love her so much, and it is evident from an array of presents and gifts she receives almost weekly from her pupils.	Head of English Panel
2.	Madam Rina	With her thick British accent, she always grabs the attention of anyone who talks to her, prominently her pupils. Her pupils imitate her all the time and that is fun for her. She believes that through imitation children learn a lot and can excel. She is also an excellent teacher for Science which is a double joy for the school to have her in the team. Madam Rina gets her pupils to write their comments and suggestions in the 'Parking Lots'. It is a noticeboard where pockets are placed for pupils to write anything they wish about the lessons they have every day. She uses the pieces of writing by her pupils to improve her future lessons. She has recently been awarded as the most famous teacher in school during the Teacher's Day celebration, and everyone agrees with it.	Head of English Panel
3.	Madam Mages	She is the one and only Indian teacher in the school, so she is fondly known as 'Aishwarya Rai'. Everyone calls her that, including her pupils. She uses cultural perspective as her tool to introduce and enrich her pupils with the English Language. Being a good cook, she brings in Indian food and other dishes into the classroom, and that makes learning fun all the time. One of her lessons is on making chapattis, and at the end of the lesson, all her pupils get to eat the chapattis they made and converse in English! She uses a traffic light system in the class to check her pupils' understanding. She also uses chants to grab their attention. For instance, when she says 'Hi', her pupils reply, 'Hello'. Children love these chants so much which makes her class lively most of the time.	English teacher for Years 4, 5 and 6.
4.	Madam Siti	A songbird in the school is the best description for this petite teacher. She sings at most of the school events and attracts a crowd from nowhere. She is a beauty with brain and her headmistress never wants to let her go to any other school. Madam Siti is also a workaholic who does free community English class at her school every Sunday for any children who wish to improve their language proficiency. This is a non-exam based class which focuses solely on making crafts and uses English while making the products. Her efforts have been applauded by the community leaders and that entitled her for the Excellent teacher award. Madam Siti lives by the proverb, 'When there is a will, there is a way', and indeed she has many ways to make learning fun and successful. Madam Siti gets her pupils to write a diary entry for her class wall every week. This weekly routine improves her pupils' command of the English language.	Secretary of the English Panel
5.	Madam Anis	Madam Anis is a very quiet teacher. She is never seen sitting leisurely in the staffroom or chatting away with other colleagues. She always has a book to read if she is not marking or writing her lesson notes. Her pupils describe her as a bookworm, and that image is also painted very clearly by her school administration. She is very punctual and when in class, she is a different character. She starts her lessons with a <i>doa</i> recitation in English. It is quite amazing to see and hear her children recite <i>doa</i> in English daily and every day she teaches them one daily recitation for them to go back and practise. She is a believer in formative assessment in the classroom, and she is the oldest teacher among the six who were the participants in this research.	Head of English Panel
6.	Madam Susan	Meeting Madam Susan is very enlightening. She is a strict teacher outside of the class but a dedicated one in the class. Even though children cringe at the sight of her, she receives occasional hugs from them too. She never believes in Bahasa Malaysia translation in English class, so her pupils can only speak English. She gives quizzes every week to check her pupils' grammar and vocabulary acquisition, and this puts them on their toes to remain updated with her lessons all the time.	Discipline teacher

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While conducting the data analysis, the researchers used thematic analysis as advised by Braun and Clarke [34]. The reasons for adopting thematic analysis were because it gave flexibility to the researchers and it worked effectively in capturing key ideas from the transcription. Before arriving at the distinctive themes, the researchers repeatedly read the transcriptions a few times and recognized primary ideas while the codes were being generated. After this laborious procedure, the primary themes were identified by organizing the codes. The themes obtained from analyzing the interview transcripts were presented to two experts in the area of curriculum, instruction and assessment for their expert opinion and approval of the terms used for the themes. Their agreement was later calculated for Cohen's Kappa inter-rater reliability value which resulted in $K=.887$ which means there is strong agreement between two raters in checking the themes derived. The themes were then reviewed again before the final themes were established. The excellent teachers were interviewed primarily based on the research questions which were:

- a. What are the challenges faced by the excellent teachers in preparing for authentic assessment in the classroom?
- b. How do excellent teachers prepare for authentic assessment to be used in their classroom?

3.1. Challenges faced by teachers in preparing for authentic assessment

After rigorous analysis, five themes were derived from this study: lack of support from the school administration and parents, overwhelming documentation, burdening teaching hours, too many school activities on weekends and lack of training on authentic assessment.

3.1.1. Theme 1: Lack of support from the school administration and parents

Teachers highlighted that lack of support from the school administration and parents were the greatest challenge for them in their efforts to prepare and later implemented authentic assessment in the classroom. It is evident from the interview with Madam Anis, Madam Mages, and Madam Susan.

“I always find it difficult to explain to parents who only want to see their children getting As in the exam papers. When I show portfolios of their kids work in the class, they seem to lose interest and keep asking me why the children did not do well in exam. Their ‘well’ sounds so depressing to me.” (Madam Mages).

“My school admin does not want me to focus much on authentic assessment. One of my senior assistants says it is ‘rubbish’. How devastating! I am a strong believer in authentic assessment, but I don’t get the support from them. (Madam Anis)

“There was an argument with me and my colleague. They say that I am showing off and aiming for Excellent Award and that’s the reason why I am doing authentic assessment. They don’t understand that they can actually see and help children through authentic assessment.” (Madam Susan)

The lack of support from the school administration led to frustration among the teachers and it deterred their motivation to perform better.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Overwhelming documentation

Madam Siti related her experience of being overwhelmed with too much documentation which had secured her a bed in the hospital very recently due to excessive stress.

“I could not sleep well because I kept thinking of files to be updated and I lost interest in preparing interesting lessons for my children and I could not help them. I was so depressed, and I started seeing stars every time I walked. I fainted in school and I was hospitalised.” (Madam Siti)

“Madam Mages brings documentation to be done at home. She brings all her filing papers home daily.” (Observation 3)

The teachers had to bring clerical work home, and it was taking up their quality time with family. It incurred stress to the teachers.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Burdening teaching hours

Another challenge in preparing authentic assessment is the burdening teaching hours. Principally, all the teachers in this study teach 30 to 36 periods per week which are the maximum number of hours despite them holding posts such as the Head of the English panel and secretary of the English panel respectively.

“I don’t have time to really plan authentic assessment as I am occupied with all my English classes. Sometimes I plan at home, sometimes I do ad-hoc.” (Madam Rina)

“I can’t breathe with the suffocating number of periods. To worsen the scenario, I will have to relief teachers daily. The admin thinks that I am a superhero as I am an excellent teacher.” (Madam Yana)

“Madam Yana has 32 teaching periods per week. She gets relief classes almost daily for at least 30 minutes.” (Observation 4)

This resulted in them not having time to prepare their lessons with authentic assessment included in them.

3.1.4. Theme 4: Too many school activities on the weekends

In addition to that, programmes in school have been neatly scheduled but these teachers are often overloaded with abrupt programmes which come almost every weekend. They plan something, but something else happens.

“I usually allocate a few hours during the weekends to prepare for authentic assessment and to make my lessons interesting. Unfortunately, most of my Saturdays are spent in school for unnecessary meetings and activities which are not productive at all!” (Madam Anis)

“I hate it when I have to come to school on weekends just to attend meeting which functions as a bombarding arena for the admin. I wish I was at home working on my teaching plans.” (Madam Mages)

“There are programs every Saturday in Madam Rina’s school in the month of January and February even though the ministry clearly says that only two Saturdays can be used for school activities.” (Observation 2)

The use of authentic assessment in class was not an easy task. It needed careful and tactful planning since not much guide was available for teachers in Malaysia to carry out authentic assessment.

3.1.5. Theme 5: Lack of training in authentic assessment

Finally, Madam Siti and Madam Yana agreed that they lacked training on various approaches in assessment, in particular authentic assessment of young learners. They only read books and articles during their leisure time to add on to the knowledge on assessment, but they wished that the ministry could design courses pertaining to authentic assessment for practitioners like them.

“I feel that the MoE should design courses on authentic assessment for us. It is good and practical. I think I will discuss this matter when I have excellent teachers meeting in the future.” (Madam Siti)

“The knowledge on authentic assessment and also other approaches in assessment is important. We need to equip ourselves with the knowledge.” (Madam Yana)

“Madam Yana always reads information on assessment from the books she has on her table. She borrows books from the library too.” (Observation 1)

The training that they received were only on content knowledge and the latest they attended such training was on C.E.F.R. cascading which required all the Heads of the English panels in schools to follow the course. Figure 2 shows clearly how the themes for the challenges faced by the teachers emerged from the codes analysed in Atlas.ti Version 8.

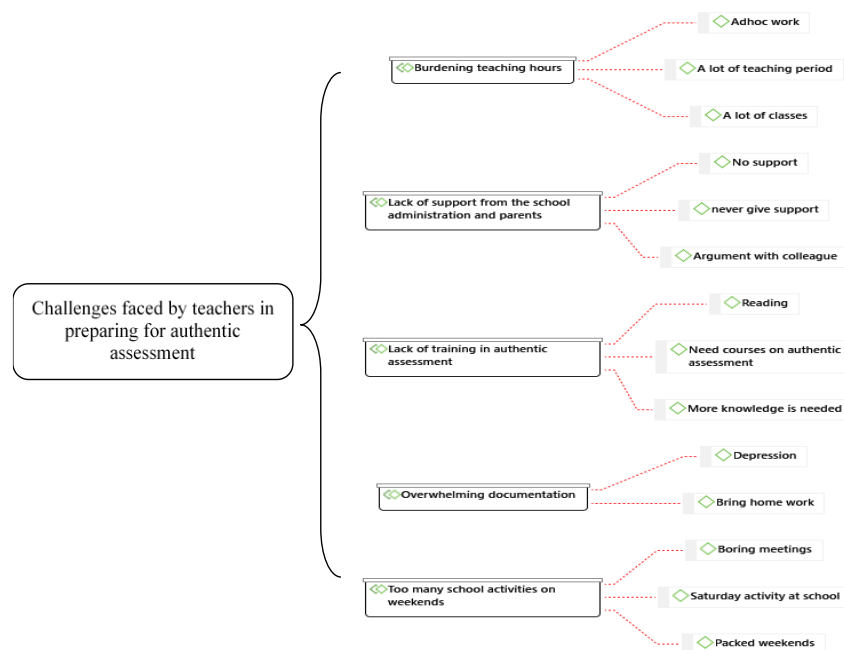


Figure 2. Challenges faced by teachers in preparing for authentic assessment

3.2. Methods of preparation for authentic assessment in the classrooms of excellent English teachers

The data analysis on the second research question revealed that excellent teachers used quizzes, songs, paragong and an immediate feedback system.

3.2.1. Quizzes

When the teachers were asked on what were the methods they used in the authentic assessment, they gave a myriad of responses. All the responses were practical and easy to be carried out.

Madam Susan believed that quizzes played an important role in her class for her to continuously check on her pupils’ progress. She used various types of quizzes ranging from paper and pencil quizzes to online version which utilized Frog VLE. She felt that her pupils enjoyed the quizzes and most importantly, their content knowledge showed tremendous improvement.

“I have weekly quizzes in class. Sometimes I bring them to the computer lab to play quiz games. Their grammar has improved a lot and what I like most about the online quiz is that they get their scores instantly and my job is to just facilitate.” (Madam Susan)

“My pupils love it when I give them quiz at the end of each topic. Sometimes I ask them questions out of the topic that we learnt in class, but it is something related. For example, we learnt about insects. Sometimes I include questions on sea animals just to check if there is anyone who has general knowledge based on their readings. To my surprise, yes, many of them can score it well because they find it important to read more.” (Madam Mages)

“Madam Susan carries out quiz in class weekly. She has quiz on Simple Past Tense. Pupils who win in the quiz get stickers from her.” (Observation 6)

Even though there was still room for improvement, the teachers had a good understanding of authentic assessment. This was a good sign for them to learn and be better at it.

3.2.2. Songs

Since Madam Siti loved singing, most of her lessons involved songs. She even used songs as part of her authentic assessment. She always got her pupils to listen to songs and fill in the blanks and later, she taught parts of speech using the same sheet. She believed in scrutinizing her teaching aids well.

“I love to use songs in the classroom. It feels good when during recess I bumped into pupils who hum songs that I taught in the class. It is challenging to get my pupils to use English but with songs, things fall in place well.” (Madam Siti)

“Madam Siti sings daily. She introduces new vocabulary in her songs and makes her pupils memorize the words through the songs.” (Observation 4)

“I use songs daily as my set induction or closure. I don’t sing the whole song. I only do the chorus. I choose catchy ones and I let the pupils to go back and practice the songs. I can see that they are learning new vocab when I ask them to sing on their own. It is fun to see them begging for more. I manage to grab their attention in class using those songs. (Madam Yana)

Since children generally love songs, it helped in grabbing their attention to the lessons prepared by the excellent teachers.

3.2.3. Paragogy (Learning with peers and peer assessment)

There were teachers who used other forms of authentic assessment like peer assessment and self-assessment to gauge pupils’ learning. They expressed that their pupils felt good when these forms of assessment were carried out in the classroom.

“When I use self-assessment which basically consists of checklist for the pupils to tick, they took time to reflect and tick honestly. I do have cases where pupils did not know what to tick because they were not present during the lessons, but I guided them through. Overall, now, my pupils are ready with authentic assessment which encourages them to be more accountable for their own learning.” (Madam Anis)

“I use a lot of peer assessment in the classroom. I encourage the pupils to use ‘2 Stars and 1 Wish’ method while assessing their friend’s work. It works like this –pupils have to write two good things about their friends work and one comment on how it can be improved. I focus more on the strength. I go around checking their comments. Sometimes, they were playful, and they write nonsensical comments which I have to ask them to be responsible for.” (Madam Siti)

“Madam Anis uses self-assessment checklist for pupils to tick when they embark on written task. She guides them to use the checklist.” (Observation 5)

Variations in authentic assessment made the assessment process smooth and fun-filled.

3.2.4. Immediate feedback system

The teachers also adopted an immediate feedback system in the classroom. They believed in positive feedback, and they showed it in their tasks.

“Madam Yana tells the pupils to add in a simple introduction to the written task when the group showed their work to her.” (Observation 1)

“I do write short comments with coloured pens on their work. It is not red. It will be in purple or pink.” (Madam Anis)

Feedback with young learners provided positive output in their work and resulted in them being motivated to learn the target language. Figure 3 demonstrates the derivation of the themes from the interview analysis for the methods of preparation for authentic assessment of the excellent teachers.

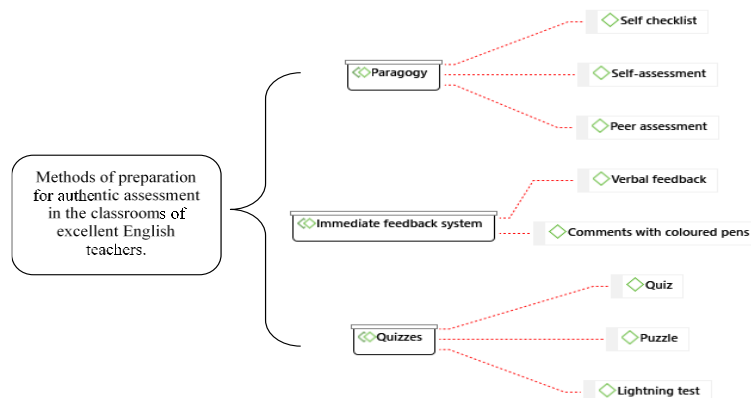


Figure 3. Methods of preparation for authentic assessment

3.3. Discussion

From the analysis of the data, there are two major aspects of this research that need discussion. The first one involves the challenges faced by the excellent teachers who practice authentic assessment in their classroom, and the latter aspect is the methods these teachers adopt in carrying out an authentic assessment in their respective classes. These two aspects are equally pertinent in the use of authentic assessment in classes, particularly in a Malaysian classroom, because it is a new scenario of the implementation of school-based assessment in our context.

In relation to the first aspect of the research, a number of issues were identified. The participants highlighted that support from the school administration is what they need. This is strongly agreed upon in a considerable number of previous studies [35-37]. The findings of these studies indicated that teachers need ample support from the school administration to carry out curriculum and assessment practices in schools. The support will aid the learning process and eases the teacher's workload. Lombardi [38] in his study pinpointed that faculty resistance and burdening teaching time were imperative barriers for teachers in preparing and evaluating authentic learning activities.

On the other hand, overwhelming documentation appears to be another hindrance for teachers in implementing authentic assessment. Similarly, Archbald and Fred [39] asserted in their book that minimum clerical documentation would suffice in carrying out the authentic assessment. As such, school administration should play a facilitating role in giving the teachers a helping hand, in this case, the excellent teachers, to lessen their burden caused by overwhelming documentation. Interestingly, scholars also suggested that digitisation of the assessment of the task could be carried out in the 21st-century as it will allow for the learners to be tested more vigorously using the state-of-the-art methods [40, 41].

Subsequently, when the participants were asked about the challenges the excellent teachers faced in implementing authentic assessment, the excellent teachers unanimously agreed that they need pedagogical training and also courses on authentic assessment which will enable them to implement the 'new' assessment efficiently. Serin [42] affirmed that what is stated in the curriculum is not in line with the assessment practices because teachers did not have pedagogical content knowledge and training on implementing the proper assessment methods. This in return, puts learning at the risk where learners are not taught by trained professionals.

Moving on to the second part of the research, the participants used various techniques of authentic assessment to obtain results and improve their students' learning process. Quizzes and songs were among the activities used in this current research. Bruce et al. [43] stressed that in authentic assessment, teachers could collect evidence of learning from an array of activities and not focused on one particular technique. Along with this, Razmawaty and Othman [44] indicated that proper assessment method might produce students with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). This has been articulated to the teachers since the implementation of the new syllabus in the year 2011. Apart from various activities, the excellent teachers in this study executed some useful methods of authentic assessment which are paragogy and immediate feedback system. Paragogy refers to the study and practice of peer learning [17]. Peer assessment using simple tick-observation checklist and simplified questionnaire [45] with sufficient practice is believed to be less stressful. The inclusion of fun elements like the use of stars and wish lists leveraged learners' confidence [46] and gained positive feedback from the students [47, 48]. The immediate feedback system which was practiced by the excellent teachers was considered to be aiding the learning process more positively as indicated by Scott [49] in his research that it improved the quality of the learners' written assignment.

4. CONCLUSION

Even though authentic assessment is still in its infancy in Malaysian schools, it is not impossible to be implemented in stages and with proper guidelines and training for teachers. As such, we would like to recommend that the Ministry of Education should conduct seminars and hands-on courses on authentic assessment for teachers to equip themselves with content knowledge on planning, designing and implementing authentic assessment in the classroom. With that, future research could investigate learners' perspectives to examine how authentic assessment helps them in their learning.

There are two major implications of this study. Firstly, excellent teachers met various challenges, but that did not deter their preparation and use of authentic assessment in their respective classes. Excellent teachers should be given ample support in teaching and learning to reap more successful outcomes from the process. Authentic assessment is a new assessment in the Malaysian primary school context, thus teething problems and challenges, as described in this study, are expected to arise. There is a need for teachers to move forward in implementing more authentic teaching and learning which leads to authentic assessment. The reflection of the teachers should be taken as a vital component of teaching and learning and it will improve the practices of using authentic assessment in the classroom.

Secondly, numerous variations of authentic assessment can be used in the classroom. The teachers creatively used multiple ways of giving and getting feedback from their teaching and learning activities. Since paralogy is a new concept that is yet to gain interest in our education system, teachers can be encouraged to adopt activities involving assessment that includes paralogy and later document them in classroom-based research as an academic contribution. With ample reading and support from the school administration, teachers will assuredly be able to implement authentic assessment with their creativity and make it a success in assisting and moving students' learning to another level.

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