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Inclusive assessment for linguistically diverse learners in higher education

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ABSTRACT

As classrooms become increasingly diverse in higher education, educators are emphasising inclusive practices in teaching and learning to accommodate the needs of diverse learners. There is also an emerging need for an inclusive approach in assessment for accessibility, opportunity, relevance and engagement. This study, using design-based research guidelines with student–faculty partnership, designed, developed, implemented and evaluated contextually sensitive assessment protocol as inclusive and fair assessment. Data from students’ reflections and face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions suggested that, despite concerns such as potential bias, time and accommodation challenges, such assessment practices can make valuable contributions in creating a positive learning environment, improving relatedness and self-esteem and motivating and engaging students for better effort and effective learning. Implications for higher education practitioners with diverse learners are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive assessment;
linguistically diverse learners;
design-based research;
student–faculty partnership

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education worldwide has broadened student diversity in higher education institutions in recent years (De Wit 2011). However, it translates into a challenge for to ensure equity and inclusion for all students to facilitate maximum personal, social and academic growth. Institutions around the world have made inclusive teaching and learning a priority through policy, institutional and instructional commitment (May and Bridger 2010; Wray 2013). However, this endeavour has remained full of challenges. The empirical evidence on effective implementation of inclusive teaching and learning has unveiled a host of factors, such as lack of professional training (Forlin 2012), overcrowded classrooms (Hassan, Parveen, and Nisa 2010), teachers’ skills, attitude and willingness (Avramidis and Norwich 2002), inadequate support and resources (Wilde and Avramidis 2011) that affect successful inclusion. Those teaching in higher education have raised similar concerns, along with compromises to academic standards while practicing inclusivity (Croucher and Romer 2007; Hockings et al. 2008). In spite of these challenges, consistent efforts for inclusion are made to create innovative ways and accessible material to engage students who are diverse in terms of culture, abilities, skills, prior experiences and preferences (Banks 1989; Croucher and Romer 2007; Santoro 2009). It is established that through systemic change at the policy and practice level, this shift towards inclusive education can become successful (May and Bridger 2010). Failing to do so can result in derailing the engagement of

non-traditional students (Plaut, Thomas, and Goren 2009), restricting widening participation and the educational benefits of heterogeneous environments and harming equity agendas (Trotman 2005).

Inclusive education has been explained by Welch (2000), thus: 'it would be unfair to keep glasses from those who need them and equally unfair to make everyone wear glasses; it is my job, as a teacher, to make sure everyone gets the help they need and that help will be different for each student' (38). The philosophy of inclusive pedagogy is grounded in upholding human rights, and promoting respect and equality, by providing equal opportunity for participation to all students irrespective of their gender, race, ethnicity, language or physical ability (Banks 1998; Kaur, Noman, and Awang-Hashim 2015).

The theoretical foundations of inclusion are grounded in the social development theory of Erikson (1956) and the cognitive development theory of Piaget (1971). According to Erikson (1956), the two important elements that contribute towards identity development in the late adolescent period are a persistent sameness within oneself and a persistent sharing with others. This stage is marked by increased internal conflict as well as the potential for growth, which facilitates adults in experimenting with social roles and finding their niche. This is reinforced by the concept of disequilibrium, as suggested by Piaget (1971); that discontinuity and discrepancy stimulates cognitive growth. Therefore, exposing adults to diversity and inviting their participation in inclusive practices will offer them an opportunity to solve psychological and social conflicts, experiment with new ideas, new relationships and new roles, which in turn facilitate active thinking skills, intellectual development and motivation (Gurin et al. 2002).

Considering the educational benefits of inclusive education in a heterogeneous environment, Gurin et al. (2002) reiterated the ideas of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Powell, quoted in Regents of the University of California (1978), that suggested that quality of higher education largely depends on a diverse student body that provides wide exposure to ideas for social and cognitive development. In the classroom situation, diversity exposes students to complex learning environments that comprise novelty and uncertainty; in order to seek a familiar world, students experience complex mental activity that promotes cognitive growth (Langer 1978). The empirical evidence for these assertions is synthesised in Shaw (2005). Pascarella et al. (2001), through a longitudinal study, found that students' diversity experiences during college had positive effects on their critical thinking skills. Umbach and Kuh (2002) examining the impact of diversity on student engagement found that students who participated in diversity-related activities reported higher levels of academic challenge, active participation in collaborative learning and greater learning growth. Terenzini et al. (2001), who examined the effects of varying degree of classroom diversity on students' learning outcomes, found that classroom diversity was significantly related to students' problem solving skills.

Inclusive assessment

Assessments play an integral role in teaching and learning; effective assessment is a way towards improved instruction (Popham 2003). However, assessment in classroom settings with learners from racially, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds has always been a critical challenge for educators (Commins and Miramontes 2006). Literature on diversity is full of evidence that linguistically diverse students display poorer educational outcomes than their peers (Bennett et al. 2004; Conchas and Noguera 2004; Sanders 2000). The poor outcomes can be attributed to inadequate understanding of classroom activities, or assessment practices that neglect the needs of diverse students or fail to provide a wide range of opportunity for demonstrating understanding or mastery of the content. These types of achievement gaps can be filled with inclusive assessment practices. Waterfield and West (2010), while delineating inclusion for equity agenda, define inclusive assessment not just as a concept but as a set of coherent actions. They explained inclusive assessment as 'a fair way of assessing for learning that achieves the objective of measuring the learning outcomes of a course and awarding grades, while recognising student diversity and different learning styles' (12).

Assessment in diverse settings requires careful examination of practices to ensure provision of equal and fair opportunity for all individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds. Educators need to plan and prepare techniques to make a fair judgment of students' abilities that are affected by linguistic preferences

and cultural values (Pavri 2001). In higher education, educators can plan and implement a variety of techniques to conduct assessments that are meaningful, authentic and informative of a wider range of students' skills. The benefits and value of such approaches in assessment in higher education are well documented in the assessment literature (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 1999; Boud and Falchikov 2006; Evans, McKenna, and Oliver 2005; Ibabe and Jauregizar 2010). Inclusive assessment promotes equity and fairness by valuing individual differences in students' capabilities and skills (Hockings 2010), which in turn makes education relevant and engaging for all students (Thomas and May 2010).

Student–faculty partnership

Traditionally, the role of assessment has been associated with awarding of a grade or certification of performance for the programme in which students have participated. However, with the emergence of formative assessment practices, assessment has now become a tool for learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006; Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans 1999). The importance of involving students in the assessment process has become central (Boud 1995), whereby students have the opportunity to interpret, analyse, evaluate and contribute their perspective. Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) propose the idea of a student–faculty partnership that is rooted in the concepts of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. The partnership is defined as a 'collaborative, reciprocal process' that encourages students to contribute in pedagogical processes, including implementation and decision-making.

The principles of collaborative process are largely rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which proposes that learning is a result of social interaction. An individual's cognitive development is significantly affected by sociocultural factors present in the environment (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Roschelle (1992) defines collaborative learning as an exercise that enables students to reach convergence through the construction, monitoring and repairing of shared knowledge. The interactive process during collaborative learning and assessment causes conceptual changes, as students reach new understandings by constructing new knowledge. Students' involvement in assessment develops assessment literacy, which is a combination of skills, knowledge and competencies. Students gain conceptual understanding of the role of assessment, understand alignment between learning outcomes and assessment approaches and learn appreciation for relationship between assessment and learning (Smith et al. 2013). The process of creating rubrics in alignment with the programme outcomes, active participation in assessment process and judging quality of their own and others' work improves students' assessment literacy that further enhances students' learning (Boud 1995; Deeleya and Bovill 2015). Inviting students to partner in designing and implementing assessment may empower students and encourage accountability. Empowering students in the assessment process facilitates skills for lifelong learning, instils responsibility for their own learning and makes them self-regulated learners (Boud and Falchikov 2007; Smith et al. 2013).

Boud (2007) proposes purposefully planned assessment that will develop competency among students to be able to judge the quality, completeness and accuracy of the work they produce. Smith et al. (2013) encourage dialogue between instructors and students in planning and implementing the assessment process to enhance understanding of assessment task instructions and criteria. Integrating students' voice in higher education assessment process is located in critical pedagogy that shares its principles with the inclusive pedagogy. Embedded in the human rights principle of inclusive pedagogy, critical pedagogy promotes a democratic process, where students must partner in the educational process to balance the power structure in the classroom and seek equity (Lorente-Catalan and Kirk 2014). Introducing innovative and novel approaches to assessment may not always be received well by the students, as inexperience with the new methods might affect their performance (McDowell 2001). To respect the principles of equity, mitigate resistance and bring confidence for new assessment methods, instructors must involve students in the process.

The study context

Malaysia is a pluralistic society (Yaacob 2011), a multilingual nation where Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English languages are used frequently for educational and official purposes (Zi 2013). Under the umbrella of the internationalisation thrust (MoHE 2011), the goal of National Higher Education Strategic Plan beyond 2020 is to transform Malaysia into an education hub. As a result, Malaysia is witnessing a steady increase in the number of foreign students (UNESCO 2013). This has further intensified the diversity, especially the linguistic diversity, in classrooms all over Malaysia, with students bringing in a variety of English proficiency levels with them.

The university where this study was conducted hosts a significant number of foreign students, predominantly from non-native English-speaking countries. However, students from a large number of non-native English-speaking countries are exempted from English language proficiency requirement in most Malaysian public universities (Universiti Putra Malaysia 2016; Universiti Teknologi Malaysia 2016; Universiti Utara Malaysia 2016).

In the case of Malaysian students, all the public universities in Malaysia require a minimum English proficiency of Band 3 level in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) (Lee 2004). However, most Malaysian universities also require remedial English courses for students who obtain band 3 in MUET to further increase English proficiency (Rethinasamy and Chuah 2011). This suggests that band 3 of MUET score is not sufficient for students to pursue tertiary education with English as medium of instruction. Hence, the variability and the lack of proficiency in English language standard among students in higher education pose a great challenge for instructors.

Given the diversity in the classroom, employing conventional methods or standardised ways for measuring learning outcomes of students would be an inequitable approach. It is established that such practices fail to consider the influence of social, cultural and contextual factors on performance evaluation (Gutierrez-Clellen 1996; Hernandez 1994). Therefore, designing and implementing contextually sensitive assessment that is inclusive ensures fairness and equal opportunity for all students is a plausible solution.

Public institutes of higher education in Malaysia have adopted outcome-based teaching and learning designs (Biggs and Tang 2011), gradually replacing product-orientated norm-referenced assessment procedures with criterion-referenced assessment. In the university where this study was conducted, lecturers use a variety of methods, such as critical reflections, case studies, reports, presentations, group tasks and paper tests to assess intended learning outcomes (ILO). Due to a large number of enrolments in the postgraduate programme chosen for this study, instructors mainly rely upon group work assessments that contribute a significant percentage towards the final score. Group work is considered to be an important component in higher education as, due to time constraints, instructors often do not have the opportunity to observe and assess individual contributions (Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000; Topping 1998).

The assessment criteria for regular group work vary according to the learning outcomes of the particular course. Regular group work generally comprises presentations using power point slides on the given topic by one member of each group. However, this mode of assessment is often disputed or considered plagued with shortcomings, such as free riding of individuals (Strong and Anderson 1990), fairness of assessment (Walker 2002), group conflict in responsibility sharing (Mello 1993) and bias (Magin 2001). Such assessments become more challenging in a situation where the classroom population is diverse in terms of language, culture and individual skills. To overcome the challenges of group work in a linguistically diverse class, this study, drawing upon the principles of faculty–student partnership (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014), attempts to design, develop, implement and evaluate contextually sensitive assessment protocols for inclusive and fair assessment.

The assessment objectives were presented to the students involved in this study. The objectives were the following: understanding the content in terms of related principles and theories; sharing knowledge, which included researching relevant information, discussing with group members, organising

Table 1. Profile of the participants.

		Total	M	F	% Malay as FL	% Chinese as FL	% Tamil as FL	% Arabic as FL	% other	% EPL High	% EPL Middle	% EPL Low
Sem 1	Sec 1	35	12	23	38	20	31	11	0	34	49	17
Sem 1	Sec 2	29	15	14	52	17	24	0	7	14	24	62
Sem 2	Sec 1	28	8	20	36	31	35	0	18	32	29	39
Sem 3	Sec 2	22	9	13	36	31	25	18	0	27	36	37

Notes: Chinese – Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka; FL – First Language; EPL – English Proficiency Level; Sec – Section; Sem – Semester; M – Male; F – Female.

the contents and delivering it to the class; and demonstrating ways to apply that knowledge in real-life situations. The students in the classes worked collectively in small groups to produce knowledge sharing. The overall process presented the students with an equal opportunity to voice their opinions, share their expertise, make choices for modes of presentation and language on the basis of their preferences and acquire knowledge. The major research question that guided the study was as follows: What were the students' experiences with the new form of assessment?

Methodology

A design-based research methodology was employed. This is an approach that facilitates educational scholarship within the framework of scholarship of teaching and learning. According to the Design-Based Research Collective (2003), 'design-based research, which blends empirical educational research with the theory-driven design of learning environments, is an important methodology for understanding how, when, and why educational innovations work in practice' (5). Design-based research involves collaboration among researchers to improve educational practices, or to solve issues pertaining to real classroom settings, through cycles of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation of contextually sensitive designs, thereby extending knowledge and sharing with other practitioners (Van den Akker et al. 2006; Wang and Hannafin 2005).

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at a large public university in Malaysia with a total student population of around 35,000. The participants were 114 in-service teachers, aged between 28 and 40 years of age, and enrolled in Master of Education degree programme. Most participants were either in the third or fourth semester of the programme.

Data were pooled from four different sections during two semesters (two courses each semester) with the same instructors, who were also the researchers in this study. The instructor and the research design remained the same, which facilitated consistency in application and evaluation. The class size for each section ranged between 22 and 35 students. The group size in each classroom comprised four to six members in each group.

Table 1 details the number of students in each class with different first languages. In each class, Malay as first language is reported most often, followed by Tamil and Chinese. Students with Arabic as first language were also present in two classes. Other languages reported were Hausa, Punjabi, Thai and Iban. The table also displays student-reported English language proficiency levels. The data suggest that each class comprised varied level of English language skills.

The study was conducted in phases. Participation in phase 1 and phase 3 was voluntary, and students were informed that they would not be scored for the activity. Group activity in phase 2 was the course requirement; therefore, all the students participated. However, given the nature of the research design, most students participated in all the phases.

Procedure and data collection

The data were collected over a period of two semesters. A semester comprised 14 weeks of face-to-face interaction between the instructors and students. In accordance with the norm of design-based research, the study was conducted in phases. Each phase was repeated in a similar way during the second semester. Comparative analysis of the feedback on protocol design allowed for an iterative process to refine the new assessment protocol. The outcomes and process described in each phase are reported using combined data collected during the two cycles that took place in semesters 1 and 2.

Phase 1 – design

This began with collaboration between the researchers and students (Wang and Hannafin 2005) and lasted for the first three class meetings. The objective of this phase was to gather as much information as possible from the students on assessment methods they thought were appropriate for inclusive and fair assessment, and which could assess their true learning

Students were asked to reflect upon group work assessment methods which they had experienced, following Gibbs' reflective cycle (Gibbs 1988). Approximately 98% of the students submitted their reflections. Data for each stage of Gibbs' cycle (what happened, what were you feeling and thinking, what was good or bad about the experience, what could you make out of it, what else could you have done, what would you do next) were put together into categories by the researchers.

Two focus group sessions were conducted with each classroom where students, following their reflections and in collaboration with the instructor, discussed the issues encountered in regular group work assessment methods and designed an alternative protocol for implementing group work assessment that would overcome these.

In the first focus group, three distinct categories emerged. The first was the lack of flexibility in choosing a language as a medium of presentation. Students felt that the group with large number of English speakers got undue advantage. The second category was the lack of choice in the mode of presentation. Students felt that the groups that were less interested in the prescribed method of presentation were given no choice, without any consideration of their own preference for presentation. The third category that emerged was the unilateral nature of the score given by the instructor. Boud (2000) has highlighted unilateral assessment as one of the main problems of common assessment practice.

Students felt that the instructor relied upon the criterion that was set unilaterally by them, without any insight into what the students really knew and their real understanding of the content. Smith et al. (2013) have also identified this as a major issue: expectations, instructions and criteria for assessment task are presented in the lecturer's language and underpinned by his or her assumptions.

During the second focus group, the students and the instructors deliberated upon the categories that emerged from the first focus group, and designed an alternative protocol for assessment to guide them towards a more inclusive and fair group assessment task. The protocol included the following:

- (1) It was agreed that homogenous groups would be created in terms of English language proficiency and speakers of languages other than English. Groups would have the autonomy to choose their language of preference as a medium for presenting the group task.
- (2) Each group would be given an opportunity to choose the topic of interest and the autonomy to decide on how to present their task.
- (3) To solve the issue of the unilateral nature of the score, it was agreed that students would partner with instructors in creating the rubrics for the assigned group tasks. An individual score would be calculated on the basis of group member score, score from the other group and the score from the instructor.

The assessment forms with rubrics for the assessment of the group task were created in collaboration with the students and the instructor. The key issues in regular group work assessment practices and the assessment objectives of the study programme guided the design and application of the descriptors.

Phase 2 – implementation

This began at the fourth meeting (Wang and Hannafin 2005). Students filled in the questionnaire to share their language-related information (as shown in Table 1). Attempts were made to form homogenous groups in terms of linguistic ability, expertise (if any), gender and number of members. Students were given extra time to interact in groups, get acquainted with each other and establish social connections. Each group was provided a number for identification purposes.

Each group was then given the course syllabus and time to discuss and choose their topic. Students were given four weeks to prepare the group task and were instructed to use the rubrics as their guide. All students worked together on the group task by making relevant contributions in their preferred areas. Students could use varied modalities to present their task, as structured oral presentations limit the opportunity to perform for those who are not fluent in English (Ward and Masgoret 2004). Presentations involved a variety of modes, such as hands on games, role plays, multimedia presentations and gallery walks. This approach gave opportunity to all members to contribute irrespective of their English language proficiency. For example, a group of students chose the Malay language to present on the psychomotor domain of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956) using role play. The theoretical parts of the activity were presented by the group members who were proficient in English. It should be noted that members in all the groups and the staff assessors could understand all languages allowed in the presentation.

Each student was instructed to submit a brief report on the contribution made towards the group task activity and the level of understanding of the topic they worked on. In week five, the group task activity began. In each session, at least two groups presented the group task activity. All the group task activities were videotaped for triangulation purposes. Each activity was assessed by the group members, as well as by the members of the other groups, using the rubrics.

To ensure precision in rating, scoring recommendations for peer evaluation guidelines recommended by Baker (2008) were followed. For within group assessment, students were instructed to reflect upon the actual contribution and behaviour of the individuals during the group task preparation and activity. The objective was to assess content understanding, collaboration and contribution. For between groups assessment, students were asked to assess and rate overall group performance. The objective was to assess quality of knowledge sharing activity and content understanding. Each member of the group was required to put their signature to indicate agreement with the group score. In both the forms, students signed a pledge, which read: 'The assessment score is not affected by or based upon my personal opinion about an individual in the group.' The instructor rated each member of the group individually on the basis of the brief report submitted. Thus, we had three set of scores, individual scores by the group members, a group score by other groups and individual scores given by the instructor.

Each student's final score was derived from the three sources, (a) average of individual score given by group members with a maximum value of 25, (b) group score given by the other groups with a maximum value of 25 and (c) individual score by the instructor with a maximum value of 15. The total was converted to a percentage score. All the scores were fed into Excel for computation and reliability purposes. Scores were checked visually for consistency, especially within group members to prevent abuse for favouritism or discrimination among the group members. A few inconsistencies were detected and students were interviewed personally before the final grading was accomplished.

Phase 3 – evaluation

After completion of the group task activity in week 13, students were informed about their composite score. In week 14, all the students were given an open-ended questionnaire, comprising the main research question that inquired about their experience with the new form of assessment activity. Twelve students volunteered to participate in face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions that were conducted shortly before the semester break. The researchers utilised prompts to elicit participants' responses. Each interview lasted for 20-30 min and was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Table 2. Summative score for the project work.

No of students			35	29	24	28
Grade	Max score	Min score	Sem 1	Sem 1	Sem 2	Sem 2
			Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 1	Sec 2
A+	89.45	100	2	0	0	0
A	79.45	89.44	18	18	11	13
A-	74.45	79.44	14	11	9	13
B+	69.45	74.44	1	0	4	2
B	64.45	69.44				
B-	59.45	64.44				
C+	54.45	59.44				
C	49.45	54.44				
C-	44.45	49.44				
D+	39.45	44.44				
D	34.45	39.44				
F	0	34.44				

Table 3. Correlations among between group score, within group score and teachers' score.

		1	2	3
1.	Between group score	–	.71*	.79*
2.	Within group score	–	–	.68*
3.	Teachers' score	–	–	–

* $p < .05$ ($n = 114$ groups).

Data analysis

The researchers individually checked transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the data. Member checks were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the information from interviewees (Creswell and Miller 2000). Randomly selected transcripts from questionnaires were matched with the video recording of group work activity for triangulation purposes (Merriam 2009). The three researchers coded the transcripts manually and independently. To overcome research bias (Yin 2009), the researchers compared the coding schemes with each other. Disparities in coding were resolved through dialogue. Then, the researchers collaboratively conducted thematic analysis to categorise the coded data.

Measurement of learning outcomes

Student involvement in assessment for determining appropriate assessment modes, creating rubrics and using them to judge their own and their peers' performance is grounded in the philosophies of social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978) and active learning (Deeleya and Bovill 2015). Table 2 presents the summative scores awarded.

Given that peer review is an ongoing process and is subjective in nature, it is recommended that the facilitators incorporate formative assessment methods with summative methods in order to evaluate the learning outcomes (Crews and North 2000). In this study, a few themes from the qualitative data also contributed information in measuring the learning outcomes. The concern regarding lack of reliability and validity of peer assessment, in terms of degree of agreement between teacher and peer scores, is common in the peer assessment literature (Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000; Topping 1998). In this study, the positive correlation between teachers', within group, and between groups' scores (Table 3) indicates reliability.

Meta-analysis by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) on this issue indicates that a number of factors that may increase consistency between teachers' and peers' marks. Among those factors some were existent in this study, such as the participants being enrolled at advanced level (Falchikov and Boud 1989), the number of participants being high (Magin 1993), the criteria being student-owned (Stefani

1994), the nature of assessment task involving group presentation and the research design being robust (Falchikov and Boud 1989).

Findings

The qualitative data helped us infer information on students' overall experiences.

Positive learning environment

A significant amount of data revealed that students' foremost responses were about experiencing a positive learning environment. They valued the classroom environment that received and appreciated students' difference. A Chinese female student reported, 'I always felt welcome in the class, by my teachers as well as my classmates'. For students, it offered a non-threatening and safe environment. As another student mentioned, 'I could just walk in class without having to worry about my weaknesses, such as my shyness or poor public speaking skills'. A Malay male student reported that:

Earlier I would register only for class that have majority of Malay student enrolment. I don't like the discomfort and anxiety I have to face in the class during exam and evaluation time. This is a core course and I had no choice but to join this class, but now I am glad I joined it.

Many others used adjectives such as 'welcoming', 'friendly' and 'comfortable compared to regular ways'. Two Malay female students mentioned that such a classroom 'took away my fear of sitting in the front lane' and 'I didn't feel extremely shy because I knew there were many others like me in the classroom'. The students expressed their appreciation for a less structured and more flexible classroom experience. A Nigerian male student said that 'we almost forgot that the activity we are planning is for our test or to get a score because the interaction with group and other group members was so informal, positive and open... and the classroom was fun and cheerful'.

Sense of relatedness

The data suggested that students experienced developing a sense of relatedness, not only for their peers but for the instructors. They expressed how working together as a team helped them form a bond between each other. A Chinese male student wrote:

My group members were never as important to me as I experienced this time. Because this time our partnership was not one way, I was connected to them 24 h. First thing in the morning was always to check my WhatsApp and get update on my group work.

The guidelines that were laid out collaboratively eliminated the role ambiguity for contributions in the group. This further enhanced the bonding and mutual understanding between the group members. One Indian female student said in the interview 'The working system in the group was very smooth, there was no jealousy among us, or no undue burden. Because our roles and contributions were very clear from the beginning'. The collegial work environment fostered mutual understanding and respect between the students, which was indicated by a Malay female student, 'success of our group task is mainly due to understanding each other's strengths and weakness and using different ways to overcome the obstacles'. Other students reported that the quality interaction experienced during the preparation of the group task activity nurtured stronger bond between them. A Chinese male during the interview said:

Our group decided to share knowledge through the role play; I remember how we laughed and joke when practicing to act ... we were not scared of joking or hurting anyone as long we did our work together and performed ... I felt like I can go on and on working with this group.

It was noted that, during the face-to-face interviews, students did not share their experiences with the instructors; however, the written reflection produced evidence on how students had formed a special bond of trust, respect and care with the instructor. One Indian male student wrote:

It was a happy feeling for me to see that our lecturer cared for us. Instead of feeling disappointed with our weakness she made us feel good about us. I wish I could register in future for taking more courses with her.

Another student reported, 'I feel I can share my learning problems with her and even email her to ask questions that may not be very intelligent to ask'. Many students ended their reflections with blessings such as 'may God reward you for the extra effort you have made for us'. It was an expression of the connection that they had formed with the facilitators.

Increased self-esteem

Students viewed themselves as capable of contributing positively, and it also enhanced their feeling of competence. A Malay female student mentioned in her reflection:

I always knew I can contribute, but simply standing up talking in fluent English is something I was hesitant. Earlier I was surely embarrassed of getting a score without doing much in my group ... this is first time I am not feeling ashamed.

The opportunity to choose between languages and modes of presentation provided them with the agency, and they felt empowered. A Chinese male student said, 'I would normally take backseat in groupwork but this time I had many ways to help in my groupwork. I really feel proud and happy when my group is helped by me'. An Indian female student said in the interview, 'after the presentation I had a feeling that we all had hidden talents if we are allowed to use them properly we all can do well in exams'. The invitation to participate in the assessment process made them feel valued. An Indian male student wrote, 'this was a very respectful thing for us, we didn't just have to sit and take orders, our problems were heard in the class and actions were taken'. A Malay girl expresses in her reflection, 'to know that our opinions are important to lecturers for assessment makes me feel so good about learning'.

Motivation and engagement for better effort

The assessment motivated the students, which in turn invited active participation from all of them. Reported interest, enjoyment and less pressure were among the main indicators that demonstrated motivation and engagement for better effort. A Malay male student wrote:

Earlier I was never ready to even stand up in group task, but here I knew I am evaluated for what I know and what I have done. The points is not for my English or my power point slides ... this is why I was jumping in between and talking more and more.

An Algerian male student wrote, 'I felt excited before whoever presented the group task, not for a minute that I felt bored or pressured while evaluating others or presenting my work for evaluation'. The interest in doing tasks resulted in better effort. A female Malay student said, 'This type of assessment where I am heard and I have opportunity to contribute is definitely very interesting for me to perform and do my best'. Students reported that the fun and flexibility factor took away the pressure and resulted in better effort.

Another factor that demonstrated students' engagement was expression of accountability and determination. An Omani female student wrote:

The hardest part for our preparation was to how to share this information, but then we have nothing to complain, we had chosen the topic ... I didn't sleep well until I figured out how we can do it. In the end I was happy with how it went.

A Malay male student said about the preparation, 'I knew it was my job to get it done for the groupwork, and I had to do no matter what ... so I did it wholeheartedly'.

Effective learning

Most students reported that the complete process of creating and implementing the assessment had been a significant learning process for them. However, more significant was the learning of the contents

that were assigned to them as a group task. Students reported that, while preparing for the topic which they had to present to the class, they experienced deep learning. A Chinese male student wrote, 'We knew that we will be acting like teachers to our friends, so we need to master the content so that we can make them understand and answer their questions'. Another Malay male student wrote, 'Since language was not an issue, I was able to contribute to my group in Malay language, I find it easy to search, read and understand information in Malay language'. During the interview, a Malay male student mentioned that:

even though I can understand information in the English language, but when the contents were presented in using different modes such as video, games, role play, slides, web page, it was much easier to understand and store the information.

One group that prepared the material in the English language but presented in Malay language also facilitated interactive discussions. An Indian female student wrote about her experience:

It was good to see the quiet ones in my group were asking questions and involving in the discussion ... the more we discuss the better we understand the concept. I think our group was able to make it interactive and the discussion part got us better score.

The use of various modalities also contributed significantly for understanding of the content. An Indian male student said, 'The role play that I practiced several times before presenting is going to be in my head forever'. A Malay male student reported 'when we used sweets to demonstrate the concept of measurement of central tendency among groups, the practical experience helped students learn number concept faster and in easier way'. Allowing students to use a variety of modes facilitated creativity and innovation, which resulted in meaningful learning experiences. A Malay female student said, 'By seeing others presenting their work innovatively, we did hard thinking and lots of discussions to think of a creative way to share our work, this itself helped us learn so much about the contents'.

Fairness and bias

Most students expressed contentment with the new form of assessment and the final score they received; they believed that this type of assessment was a closer reflection of their learning. A Chinese male student wrote, 'I feel satisfied with my score, it is equal to what I have really learnt about the contents'. An Indian student during the interview said 'I feel happy with the whole process, I can trust the score'. The autonomy to choose and the opportunity to work with their preferred mode were the main reasons for students to experience fairness. An Algerian male student said 'we cannot blame anything if our score is bad because we had all the options to show our knowledge and understanding'. A male Malay student wrote, 'It was a fair way to measure my learning, since we contributed in deciding rubrics'.

However, there were a few students who expressed worries where peer assessment was involved. A Malay male student wrote, 'Choice and flexibility makes me happy but asking students to give score can be a disadvantage'. A Chinese female student wrote, 'I was always tensed that no matter how well I did, if my friends didn't like me I won't get fair marks'. Another Chinese student said 'friends can give their friends higher marks'.

Time consuming

Students also expressed their concern about the time and effort required by this process. One Nigerian male student wrote that, 'The overall process was time consuming for us, we have other classes and their assignments as well, if we give so much time for one class we cannot finish other work'. A male Malay student wrote, 'I think simple test or simple presentation are easier to finish for us, this way it takes long time and effort to prepare'.

Accommodation challenges

Some unexpected attitudes were identified through the data. One student mentioned that,

Giving opportunity to everyone in the group to participate was very challenging task and tiresome for us, it is not our fault that some people are not fluent in English, why do we have to suffer, they deserve to lose marks?

Another one wrote, 'It is sometimes not fair to make us work harder to demonstrate our understanding just to accommodate those who can't show their understanding in straightforward manner'.

Discussion and conclusion

In general, the data revealed favourable experiences with the new form of assessment that benefitted students in myriad ways. However, there were legitimate concerns raised by the students that may need careful consideration.

The students reported experiencing a positive learning environment from social and emotional perspective during the design and implementation of this assessment. An environment that facilitates diversity, encourages interaction and ensures equal opportunity for all to demonstrate their understanding can cause students to feel accepted, comfortable, appreciated and safe (Wentzell, Richlin, and Cox 2011). It is important to note that, in this study, the inclusive guidelines for the new assessment were not limited to the assessment period only; the philosophy was integrated into the regular classroom culture. Instructors' practices that create learning environments for favourable social and emotional experiences play a vital role for students to enjoy and acquire knowledge (Barkley 2009).

Another dimension that originates in a positive environment is belonging. It is evident that when care, interpersonal support, inclusion and acceptance are demonstrated in the classroom, relatedness between students and teacher thrives (Shen et al. 2012). In the present case, students' perception of instructors' sensitivity towards their differences nurtured a feeling of belonging. Students in the classroom are in general supportive of each other; however, as in this study, on receiving pedagogical support from the peers, several students recounted forming a bond. Experience of relatedness and bonding with peers (Edward 2014) and teachers (Furrer and Skinner 2003) are considered as predictors of academic success and increased participation from students.

The student experience of interest, enjoyment and lack of pressure while participating in the assessment process kept them motivated and facilitated engagement. The assessment process encouraged the use of a variety of modes and tools to present the group task. Consequently, the group task presentations were highly creative, interesting and engaging, and generated interest in learning.

The other factor that promoted student interest was the facilitation of choice for students to decide on their preferred mode of presentation, language and topic. Learning in a way that promotes personal interest facilitates engagement and promotes effort (Hidi and Renninger 2006). Introducing choice in assessment is known to empower students which, in turn, facilitates student engagement (Francis 2008).

The assessment also facilitated effective learning of content for the students. In the present assessment, students used their first or preferred language to research reading, and even present the contents. This facilitated their learning and understanding of the content in an improved way. Moreover, it is evident that learning in a familiar language significantly promotes cognition and academic achievement (Ball 2010). Diversified instruction is capable of strengthening student learning; therefore, while students presented and watched others presenting the contents using a variety of engaging activities and multiple modes, their understanding of the contents increased (Rock et al. 2008).

Inviting students' concerns on regular assessment methods through reflective processes, and acknowledging them by incorporating their voice in planning the new assessment, enhanced students' self-efficacy, which in turn, increased their self-esteem (Bandura 1977; Sheridan 1991). They felt appreciated when their opinions were acknowledged and valued. Similarly, the idea of using varied modalities, in terms of language and modes to provide opportunities for everyone to contribute, also facilitated competence among students. Classrooms that promote equal opportunities for all students to perform in assessments are able to develop competence among students (Stiggins et al. 2006), which leads to improved academic achievement (Sheridan 1991).

Students expressed their contentment with the assessment design, development and implementation as it comprised multiple perspectives from the instructors as well as the students. Students believed that it

was a fair way to gauge their learning, and their scores indicated approximately a true score of their learning. However, some students expressed their concerns regarding the occurrence of rater bias when peers were involved in the evaluation process. Though it is established that the instructor must try to ensure fairness in every step involved in assessment, it is rare to have peer evaluation without any errors or variations in results. However, careful planning and precision in implementation can reduce this risk (Baker 2008).

Another surprising discovery was about the students expressing their discontent over the time and effort such assessment requires, especially in accommodating those who lack the skills required. Students' epistemological beliefs significantly affect their behaviours and learning decisions (Fruge and Ropers-Huilman 2008). If students perceive knowledge as mere accumulation of facts that can be demonstrated by writing an examination paper, or perceive knowledge as uni-dimensional, they are likely to dismiss the idea of demonstrating knowledge in the way experienced in the new assessment. Appropriate interventions that expose students to the nature of knowledge, how it can be formed and evaluated, may help in forming positive perceptions about such assessments.

Positive attitudes of teachers towards inclusion are vital; however, positive attitude of peers is equally central to implementing inclusive assessment (Lambe and Bones 2006). Inclusion is a multidimensional endeavour (Kaur, Noman, and Awang-Hashim 2015) which requires efforts from instructors as well as peers. Introducing collaborative tasks that encourage interaction and meaningful involvement can nurture empathy among students for peer support in inclusion.

As classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in higher education, there is an emerging focus on differentiated and inclusive instruction; inclusive assessment requires similar consideration (Noman and Kaur 2014). Instructors are encouraged to design contextually sensitive assessment that can successfully determine student progress against the set criteria (Stiggins et al. 2006). Such assessments, if planned and implemented with precision, do not compromise academic standards and promote equal opportunities for all students to perform.

Students might demonstrate resistance against novel assessment methods (McDowell and Sambell 1999); however, the process can be facilitated by establishing partnership with students in designing and implementing assessment, and developing assessment literacy. Initially, such assessments can be practiced with smaller weightings (Price et al. 2012), and can later become part of mainstream assessment practices. The instructor may consider developing and introducing such assessment methods in the beginning of the module or programme (Hockings 2010). It is important that such practices are appropriately documented to be shared with the academic community. Despite a few challenges and concerns experienced with the new assessment, the findings indicate that such assessment practices can make valuable contributions and benefit all students.

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