

# Professional Development Gaps and Needs in Speaking Assessment for Malaysian English Language Teachers

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## Abstract

This study looks at the professional development needs and challenges of Malaysian secondary school English teachers when conducting speaking assessments. Although Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) under the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) aim at improving communicative skills among students, challenges, such as lack of training, limited resources and unclear guidelines make it difficult for teachers to implement them. This mixed-methods study collected quantitative data from 98 teachers using a reliable questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87) and identified key areas for improvement, including creating speaking assessment tasks, maintaining ethical standards, and clearly communicating assessment results. Likewise, qualitative findings showed that additional contextual challenges, such as large class sizes and time constraints, limiting effective assessment practices. The study provides recommendations for targeted training, policy adjustments, and practical solutions tailored to teachers' needs.

## Keywords

Professional Development, Speaking Assessment, Training Gaps, Assessment Literacy, Malaysian ESL Teachers

## 1. Introduction

The Malaysian education system has transformed significantly, moving from traditional exams to classroom-based assessments (CBAs). The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) emphasizes improving students' communication skills and critical thinking abilities as part of its goals (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

To fully understand this study, it is important to define key concepts like professional development, speaking assessment, and contextual factors. Professional development refers to the ongoing training and education that help teachers enhance their knowledge, skills, and overall effectiveness in the classroom (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Speaking assessment, as Brown (2004) states, is the practice of evaluating students' oral communication skills, focusing on their accuracy (i.e., pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary), fluency, and ability to communicate meaningfully in conversational contexts. Bachman & Palmer (1996) define contextual factors as external factors that influence the designing, conducting and interpreting language assessments. These external elements include constraints like time and resources, and the characteristics of those who are assessed.

Speaking assessments are now an essential element of this new direction. They help students practice real-world communication and show how well they can speak and interact (Luoma, 2004). Even with these reforms, many Malaysian secondary school English teachers continue to face challenges in conducting speaking assessments effectively. Studies show that they frequently struggle with inadequate training, vague guidelines, and limited resources (Jamil et al., in press; Majid, 2011; Nimehchisalem et al., 2023; Rahman, 2014; Salleh et al., 2023). Consequently, many teachers still depend on traditional, writing-centered methods, which do not effectively evaluate students' spoken language skills (Azlina & Saraswathy, 2021). To assess speaking skills properly, it's important to balance checking for accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, and real-world communication abilities (Fulcher, 2012), but many teachers run into problems like large class sizes, time restrictions, and limited resources, which make it hard to do a thorough job of assessing students (Hamdan, 2019).

This study focuses on the challenges faced by Malaysian secondary school teachers in conducting speaking assessments and their specific needs for professional development. It explores gaps in their training and explores what contextual factors affect the effectiveness of professional development programs. This research seeks to provide clearer insights into how teachers can be better prepared to design and carry out speaking assessments that align with curriculum objectives and real-world communication needs.

While some studies (Fook & Sidhu, 2006; Rahman, 2014) have previously identified general issues with the training of English teachers in Malaysia, this study specifically focuses on the professional development needs of Malaysian secondary school teachers and the context of speaking assessment under the CBAs and the challenges of aligning speaking assessment practices with the classroom realities. It also highlights the gaps in the existing training programs and provides actionable recommendations for addressing these gaps.

Addressing speaking assessment issues requires attention to teachers' assessment literacy, which Mertler & Campbell (2005) describe as the combination of knowledge, skills, and beliefs needed to design, implement, and evaluate assessments effectively. This literacy encompasses technical expertise, ethical behavior,

clear communication, and an understanding of contextual factors (Taylor, 2013). Borg (2003)'s teacher cognition model further highlights how teachers' beliefs, experiences, and work environments shape their teaching methods. Lack of training, which impacts the confidence and preparedness of teachers for speaking assessment is not just limited to Malaysia; teachers worldwide face challenges when adapting to communicative language teaching (CLT) and related assessment practices (Cheng et al., 2004; Narathakoon et al., 2020). To close this gap, professional development programs should be designed to address teachers' specific needs, linking theoretical knowledge to practical teaching skills. This study aims to explore the following research questions:

- 1) What are the professional development needs of Malaysian secondary school English teachers related to speaking assessments?
- 2) What gaps do teachers identify in their professional development concerning speaking assessments?
- 3) How do contextual factors influence the effectiveness of professional development programs for speaking assessment?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study used a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This design provided a thorough examination of teachers' professional development needs and the gaps they perceive in speaking assessments, offering both broad and detailed perspectives.

### 2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select 98 English language teachers from secondary schools in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, who were actively involved in speaking assessments. Secondary school English teachers who had at least one year of experience with speaking assessments were included in the study. Teachers who did not give speaking assessments were excluded. Selecting the participants was based on purposive sampling to include diverse backgrounds in order to gain a broader understanding of the challenges and needs associated with speaking assessments. From the 98 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 4 participants were purposively selected for qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their challenges. This small sample size was chosen to allow for a detailed exploration of the participants' experiences and challenges, which would have been harder to achieve with a larger group. The selection included both novice and experienced participants from those who had reported significant challenges in conducting speaking assessment in the survey.

### 2.3. Instruments

Data collection combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, offering a complete view of teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practices.

The questionnaire used in the study was adapted from the Assessment Practice Inventory by Zhang & Burry-Stock (1997), and it was customized to fit the Malaysian secondary school context, with a focus on speaking assessment. The questionnaire consisted of 70 items, 50 of which were on a 5-point Likert-scale to measure the participants' perceived beliefs of assessment practices and 20 multiple-choice items for assessing their knowledge of speaking assessment. The researchers made sure to adapt and customize the items in line with the 7 standards of assessment competence developed by the National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Educational Association (NEA) (1990) in terms of choosing assessment methods, developing assessments, grading and ethical considerations. The questionnaire was also piloted with 10 secondary English teachers who were not part of the main study to ensure clarity and relevance, and adjustments were made based on the feedback to enhance its validity. The pilot study also tested the reliability of the questionnaire, yielding a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.87, which confirmed strong internal consistency.

To gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative findings and to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions better, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a group of 4 teachers who had completed the questionnaire. The questions were open-ended, and the participants could provide detailed response. The interview guide was reviewed by several experts and was refined for clarity and relevance. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. Then, the scripts were read carefully or assigning initial codes. Reading the scripts and refining the codes was done several times and the results were reviewed until recurring patterns were identified and themes were specified.

#### **2.4. Data Analysis**

This section describes the data analysis procedures and the measures taken to confirm the reliability and validity of the research instruments.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine participants' beliefs and practices related to speaking assessments. This analysis helped identify specific professional development needs. Quantitative data from the questionnaire, which provided a view of the participants' perceived beliefs and practices of speaking assessment, were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the participants' professional development needs. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. Themes were refined during reviews to ensure they accurately represented the teachers' experiences and perceptions. The analysis centered on teachers' professional development needs, their confidence in conducting speaking assessments, and the challenges they faced in aligning their practices with curriculum standards.

The questionnaire was initially piloted with a group of English language

teachers for checking its reliability. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which produced an overall reliability score of 0.87, indicating strong reliability. Content validity was established through a review by experts in language education who assessed the clarity and relevance of each item in the questionnaire. Based on the expert feedback received, the questionnaire was modified for appropriacy and comprehensiveness.

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were carefully examined to find common themes and patterns that reflected the professional development needs of teachers and the challenges they face in their classrooms. The data were coded and organized into categories, which were reviewed and refined multiple times to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives.

To enhance the credibility of the qualitative data, peer debriefing was conducted. Colleagues reviewed the analysis to verify its accuracy and to minimize the potential for researcher bias.

### 3. Results

This section addresses the first research question regarding the professional development needs of Malaysian secondary school English teachers in speaking assessment practices.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, several experts reviewed the instrument independently and changes were made to the initial version. Moreover, to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The result indicated strong reliability with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.87. **Table 1** presents the summary of the reliability and validity measures for the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Reliability and validity measures for the questionnaire.

| Measure              | Description                     | Value/Result                       |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Internal Consistency | Cronbach's Alpha                | 0.87                               |
| Content Validity     | Expert review and pilot testing | Adjustments made based on feedback |

The analysis of quantitative data revealed gaps in teachers' professional development needs. Participants rated their ability to create speaking assessment tasks with a mean score of 1.64 ( $SD = 0.88$ ), which clearly points to a need for further training. Similarly, they gave low scores for communicating assessment results ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) and addressing ethical considerations ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). These results highlight other areas where teachers would benefit from additional training and support. Higher but still insufficient scores were observed for choosing appropriate assessment methods ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and administering assessments ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). These results indicate the main areas for teachers' professional development needs in speaking assessment practices.

Mean scores were classified using a pre-defined scale. Scores below 2.00 were labeled as low, showing a strong need for professional development. Scores between 2.00 and 3.00 were categorized as moderate, highlighting areas for improvement, while scores above 3.00 were considered high, indicating sufficient competence. These thresholds are based on the interpretations of Likert-scale data in educational research (Norman, 2010). **Table 2** summarizes the main areas of professional development needs as perceived by teachers.

**Table 2.** Summary of professional development needs for speaking assessment.

| Training Area                        | Mean | SD   | Rank |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Developing Speaking Assessment Tasks | 1.64 | 0.88 | 1    |
| Communicating Assessment Results     | 1.81 | 1.04 | 2    |
| Ethical Considerations               | 1.83 | 0.92 | 3    |
| Choosing Assessment Methods          | 2.14 | 1.09 | 4    |
| Administering Assessments            | 2.22 | 1.05 | 5    |

Regarding the second research question, perceived inadequacies in professional development, teachers expressed a lack of access to hands-on, up-to-date training that directly supports their classroom realities. Many of those interviewed described current programs as too theoretical, with little or no provision for strategies needed to effectively manage large classrooms or address authentic speaking assessment challenges. One participant said, “The workshops focus too much on abstract concepts without giving practical tools to use in the classroom.” Another added, “We need training that solves our real challenges, like handling classes with a lot of students and assessing students’ speaking skills in limited time we have.” These statements show a clear gap between the theory-based focus of current training programs and the real challenges teachers face. Participants suggested practical solutions, like workshops on designing speaking assessment tasks, managing large classes, and handling time limitations. Additionally, teachers requested hands-on sessions where they could practice assessment techniques using real-life classroom scenarios. One participant shared that training programs should use case studies and role-playing exercises to better prepare teachers for real-world challenges, highlighting the importance of practical, context-focused professional development.

The third research question referred to the issues of contextual factors. The analysis of the qualitative data identified three major themes representing gaps in the training programs, which were limited access to current training resources, inconsistent guidance from educational authorities, and context-specific challenges, like large class sizes and time restrictions. One of the participants addressed the lack of resources, saying, “We must create own assessment tasks because the provided materials are not suitable for our students.” In the absence of very much formal guidance or training that could assist in creating effective

assessment tools, many participants drew heavily on personal experience; this is an area that requires targeting by professional development initiatives.

According to several teachers the guidance from education authorities was often unclear and inconsistent, and they found it difficult to align their assessment practices with official expectations. They also mentioned that large class sizes and a lack of time in the classroom were big challenges when trying to assess speaking skills effectively. Participants consistently noted that managing a class of 40 students meant that they could barely give attention to individual speaking skills; most times, they just focused on written tasks, revealing how structural constraints influence the assessment of speaking. According to the teachers, the systemic policies that do not adequately address the existing lack of resources result in ineffective assessment practices. One participant said in a class of 40 students, assessing each student's speaking ability individually is almost impossible.

The qualitative findings suggest that there is a gap between teachers' belief in the value of speaking assessment and their ability to do it effectively in practice mainly because of challenges related to their teaching context. The identified gap indicates a necessity for professional development initiatives to offer strategies which can fix the unique challenges teachers face within their classrooms.

## 4. Discussion

Having identified the challenges and professional development needs of Malaysian secondary school English teachers in speaking assessments, this section explains how the findings of the study align with or add to earlier research and points out the gap between what policies expect and what happens in classrooms. The section also offers recommendations on overcoming issues, such as lack of training and resources to help teachers apply what they learn in practice.

### 4.1. Addressing Professional Development Gaps

A large number of participants mentioned that they had not received any formal training in designing speaking assessment tasks. Earlier studies have also pointed out major gaps in teacher training and professional development (Fook & Sidhu, 2006; Rahman, 2014), and this finding confirms that the issue persists. It highlights the need for targeted training programs to help teachers design and implement assessments that meet the requirements of the curriculum.

Although this study confirms previous research findings regarding the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities and the failure of current professional development programs for Malaysian English teachers in addressing their practical challenges with large class sizes, time restrictions and access to limited resources (Majid, 2011; Hamdan, 2019), it adds to the literature by highlighting how the specific demands of speaking assessments exacerbate these challenges.

### 4.2. Contextual Barriers to Effective Speaking Assessment

Teachers pointed out several challenges, including large class sizes, limited

teaching time, and a shortage of resources, all of which make speaking assessments harder to carry out. These challenges are consistent with findings from Cheng et al. (2004) and Narathakoon et al. (2020) observed in different settings, but they also show how such challenges manifest locally. Addressing these issues requires understanding both their broad scope and their specific forms in different educational contexts.

Many participants indicated a significant need for the development of practical strategies for managing large classes and using the limited instructional time. Teachers frequently experienced frustration with being unable to effectively assess each student, mainly due to time limitations. Providing teachers with targeted techniques and resources to assess speaking skills in large groups has the potential to significantly improve the effectiveness of speaking assessment.

### **4.3. Ethical Considerations and Communication of Assessment Results**

Teachers also felt the need for training that addresses ethical issues and effective communication strategies for sharing assessment results. There was considerable uncertainty regarding the provision of fair, clear, and constructive feedback to both students and parents. This point supports Taylor (2013)'s focus on the importance of ethics and effective communication skills within assessment practices. The challenges in communicating assessment results appear to stem from several sources. Teachers often cited a lack of confidence in delivering feedback, which they attributed to inadequate training on communication strategies. Unclear and inconsistent policies from educational authorities added to the problem, making many teachers unsure about how to share assessment results with students and parents. This shows the need for professional development that builds practical communication skills and offers clear policy direction. To address this, professional development programs should help teachers build the skills needed to handle ethical challenges in speaking assessments.

### **4.4. Bridging the Gap between Beliefs and Practice**

A common theme in the study was the gap between teachers' belief in the value of speaking assessments and their ability to put this belief into practice. Although teachers understand the importance of assessing speaking skills, practical barriers like insufficient training, limited resources, and systemic issues prevent effective implementation. As highlighted in the research, teachers' beliefs often conflict with systemic expectations due to a lack of training and resources, creating a divide between their intentions and what happens in the classroom. This finding is consistent with broader research on teacher cognition, indicating that systemic and contextual factors impact assessment practices. To bridge this gap, it is necessary that professional development includes not only theoretical frameworks but also provide practical training and ongoing support.

The findings of this study align with existing research on teacher professional

development and assessment practices. They are consistent with Borg (2003)'s teacher cognition model, which highlights how teachers' beliefs, experiences, and teaching contexts interact to shape their practices. The study found that teachers genuinely value speaking assessments but putting them into practice is not always easy. Overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources often get in the way. These challenges also reflect what Fulcher (2012) viewpoint that teachers often find it difficult to balance focusing on correct language use with encouraging natural, effective communication when assessing speaking skills.

#### 4.5. Implications for Policy and Practice

To close the existing gaps in the speaking assessment, policymakers should focus on creating practical, context-specific professional development programs. Teachers need specialized training, clear guidance, and consistent support to enhance their speaking assessments. Teachers should receive focused training, clear guidance, and strong support to improve their speaking assessment practices. Future efforts should focus on building teachers' confidence and skills in designing and conducting speaking assessments, while also offering strategies to tackle specific contextual challenges.

#### 4.6. Recommendations

The study suggests several ways to meet teachers' professional development needs. In the short run, training should focus on practical techniques and strategies, giving teachers the tools they need to design and conduct speaking assessments effectively. These programs should go beyond theoretical concepts and tackle practical issues, such as managing large classes and addressing time constraints. Providing classroom-specific resources, like task templates and rubrics, can also give teachers the tools they need to conduct speaking assessments more effectively and with greater confidence.

To make lasting improvements, it's important to create a professional development framework that gives teachers ongoing support. This could include things like follow-up sessions, peer mentoring, and workshops where teachers can build on what they've already learned. Adding training on ethics and communication would also help teachers give fair, meaningful feedback to students and parents.

Policymakers and education authorities should also focus on developing clear, practical guidelines for speaking assessments. These guidelines need to match what's expected in the curriculum and what's actually possible in the classroom. On top of that, building teacher networks and learning communities would give teachers a chance to share ideas, solve problems together, and support one another. In resource-limited settings, building support networks doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. Teachers can create informal mentoring groups in their schools or local communities to share ideas and solutions. Simple, regular gatherings like workshops or meetings can bring teachers together, encouraging collaboration and offering support without the need for costly tools or technology.

Teachers also suggested creating printed resource booklets or guides on speaking assessment practices, tailored to local contexts, as an alternative to online materials. These strategies ensure that professional development efforts remain inclusive and effective, even in resource-constrained settings. Such training will be useful in enabling teachers to design, employ, and assess speaking tasks that meet curriculum objectives while satisfying everyday communication needs.

Professional development should address issues of ethics and communicating assessment results so that fairness, honesty, and usefulness of the feedback given are not distorted. With issues like large class sizes and limited instructional time, realistic strategies such as ways to run group assessment activities must be offered provided that the fairness and validity of the assessments are not compromised.

Policymakers' and educational authorities' support is essential. Teachers need clear policies and guidelines that are in line with educational goals. Professional development should be executed so that policymakers can ensure that it incorporates continuous support, such as follow-up sessions, mentoring, and peer collaboration, so what the teachers learn can easily be applied.

Finally, creating a support network for teachers to share experiences and strategies related to speaking assessments can encourage collaboration among them and reduce feelings of isolation. Peer learning communities, workshops, and forums can give teachers a space to discuss challenges, share ideas, and find joint solutions to common assessment problems.

## 5. Conclusions

This study explored the gaps and needs in Malaysian English teachers' professional development for speaking assessments, focusing on how prepared they are to implement Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs). Unlike earlier research that mainly looked at general issues in teacher training, this study highlighted specific challenges related to speaking assessments, such as designing tasks, communicating results, and addressing ethical concerns. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study not only identified these gaps but also offered practical recommendations tailored to teachers' unique contexts. These findings help bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing useful insights for policymakers, teacher trainers, and educators aiming to improve speaking assessment practices.

The study has some limitations. Since the sample only included secondary school English teachers from Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, the findings might not apply to teachers in other regions or at different educational levels. Also, the qualitative data came from interviews with four teachers, which may not reflect the full range of experiences across various teaching contexts. Future research could include a broader sample of teachers from various regions and education levels. Further studies could also examine the long-term effects of professional development programs on teachers' assessment practices and explore how changes in education policies impact speaking assessments.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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