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Student Voices in School-Based Assessment

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Abstract: The value of student voices in dialogues about learning improvement is acknowledged in the literature. This paper examines how the views of students regarding School-based Assessment (SBA), a significant shift in examination policy and practice in secondary schools in Hong Kong, have largely been ignored. The study captures student voices through a survey of 423 Secondary 5 students and interviews with 45 students in 3 schools concerning the use of SBA in the high-stakes assessment for the English Language subject. Results suggest a wide range of student perceptions of, and responses to SBA and related feedback. In general, students indicated that they did not appreciate SBA and were unable to capitalise on the feedback. The paper argues that the intentions of SBA can be threatened if these negative tendencies are not addressed through teacher education, and calls for a dialogic model that allows student participation in debates about learning improvement.

Introduction

The value of student voices in contributing to school improvement initiatives has been increasingly recognised in more developed countries in recent years (see, for example, Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011). For example, student councils are mandatory in Upper-Secondary schools in Denmark; the Ontario Education Act of 1998 required the participation of a student representative on school boards in the Canadian province; groups such as Student Voice have become vocal in North America and the UK; and an Australian bi-monthly magazine, *Connect* was established in 1979 to support active student participation in education affairs. Lodge (2005) argues that this trend is a product of six inter-connected discourse strands: debates about the nature of childhood; attention to children's rights, as expressed through international conventions; the promotion of democracy in school life; preparation for future active citizenship; the emergence of the notion of education as an economic good, with concomitant consumer rights for students; and claims that students can make a valuable contribution to school improvement as key participants in learning processes. Lodge expresses reservations about the use of student voices for some purposes (such as the appropriation by adults for their own institutional agenda) but calls for the participation of students in dialogues that improve the capacity of a school to become a vibrant learning community. Such dialogue, he claims, "also enhances adults' understanding about how young people learn, understand their learning and can take responsibility for their own learning" (Lodge, 2005, 135). Not all education systems have hitherto embraced the idea of student participation in school governance, debates about policy or curriculum choices. For instance,

the locus of this study, Hong Kong, has inherited a comparatively authoritarian model of education from its Chinese and Western heritages and tends (generally speaking) to adopt top-down decision-making processes (Morris & Adamson, 2010). One goal of this paper is to show that student voices have value in enhancing adults' understanding, and that to ignore these voices means that teachers and students miss out on excellent learning opportunities.

The paper focuses on the implementation of assessment reform in secondary schools in Hong Kong. This focus is apposite for a study of learning, because assessment frames what and how students learn. The reforms in Hong Kong are consistent with pedagogical innovations and alternative assessment methods have been introduced into practice in many education systems in recent years, often in association with constructivist theories of learning. These innovations tend to favour the integration of assessment, teaching and learning, involving students as active and informal participants. This integration has given rise to the notion of assessment for learning (AfL), whereby the formative function of assessment is viewed as a significant contributor to student progress (Birenbaum, 1996) and as a response to criticisms that one-off tests cannot generate sufficient evidence to inform instructional decisions (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). AfL practices tend to focus on both the process and products of learning, and to move away from single tests and scores expressed as a number towards regularly conducted descriptive assessment based on a range of abilities and outcomes (Sambell, McDowell & Brown, 1997), often carried out in the context of the classroom rather than the examination hall. Black and William (1998) conclude that effective AfL provides students with clearly delineated goals, appropriate learning tasks and constructive feedback, and is especially beneficial in enhancing learning by students who were previously perceived as low achievers.

In Hong Kong, AfL and school-based assessment (SBA)—which covers both formative and summative functions of assessment—formed part of a suite of comprehensive reforms that was introduced in recent years and that envisaged major changes to curricular content, pedagogy and assessment, with an emphasis on facilitating student progress in learning (Education Commission, 2003). The reforms were stimulated by the perceived need for Hong Kong to reposition itself as a global financial centre, which necessitated the provision of high quality education to ensure a supply of the requisite human capital. The reforms including furnishing more opportunities for tertiary education, improving the professional training of teachers, applying education theories that had international currency, and accommodating the specific needs of individual schools and students. Part of the movement involved decentralization of aspects of curriculum decision-making, including the School-Based Curriculum Projects Scheme introduced in 1988, the School-based Management Initiative in 1991, and School-Based Curriculum Development in 2000. These reforms were promoted as allowing schools greater autonomy in strategic and administrative decisions, bringing about more flexibility and differentiation in their implementation of government policies in education (Morris & Adamson, 2010).

SBA first appeared in the subject of English Language, one of the core subjects in the curriculum, in secondary schools in 2007. Initially it formed the oral assessment, worth 15% of the total marks for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) usually taken at the end of Secondary 5 (i.e., Grade 11, when the students are around 15 years old), but it was not incorporated into the Advanced Level examinations in Secondary 7. SBA is an integral part of the English Language assessment for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) implemented from 2012. The HKDSE replaced the dual examination system (HKCEE and Advanced Levels) and forms part of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum framework, which comprises a new 3-3-4 academic model (i.e., three years junior secondary, three years senior secondary and four years tertiary education) that aligns the structure of Hong Kong's education with the one operating in mainland China. SBA is used

for assessing individual presentations and group discussions—accounting for 10% of the total marks allocated to English Language—and for students’ oral competence (5% of the total marks) when reflecting on their experiences in the Elective Module (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009c). A seven-point scale (0-6) is deployed for teachers to assess the students’ competence in four areas: pronunciation and delivery, communication strategies, vocabulary and language patterns, and ideas and organization. SBA requires students to cooperate with their classmates to complete the tasks, which has the potential advantage of reducing the nervousness that they tend to feel when required to speak in English (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009a).

The theory underlying the thrust of the reforms is constructivism, which argues that students construct their own knowledge and understandings through active and social participation in a learning process that is tailored to meet their needs, interests and abilities. New learning is presented at an appropriate cognitive level within what Vygotsky (1978) terms the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) of the student, and scaffolded (supported) by teacher instruction. Students bring their particular attitudes towards learning and previous experiences to bear in the learning process, developing a variety of goals and motivations in response to different classroom practices (Brown, McInerney & Liem, 2009).

The relatively small allocation of marks to SBA components in English Language reflects the controversial and sensitivity of the initiative. While SBA has been a feature of some education systems for several decades, it is a relatively new phenomenon in systems such as Hong Kong where examinations have traditionally been esteemed for performing a selective function underpinned by the sense of fairness arising from the “level playing field” of similar conditions for all students. Critics are concerned that SBA provides insufficient safeguards to ensure objectivity, and teachers are often wary of the responsibility and scrutiny that SBA entails for them (Morris & Adamson, 2010), especially as English is a key determinant of university access.

Curriculum reform in Hong Kong has long aspired to consensus-building, due partly to the perceived lack of democratic legitimacy of the colonial and post-colonial governments, and partly to the cultural preference for harmony (Morris & Adamson, 2010). Key stakeholders include the parents, as they participate in a quasi-market when selecting schools for their children; school leaders, including the religious groups, community associations, commercial organizations and prominent individuals who assume managerial responsibilities for non-government schools (which form around 90% of the total); academics and subject specialists who serve on advisory boards; teachers; and the business sector, which has a powerful voice in government affairs. Students, however, are not consulted—although they could contribute their ideas through the general public consultation processes. As a result, curriculum reforms tend to reflect adult intentions and aspirations. In the case of AfL and SBA, students are ascribed a participatory role in shaping their own learning, and so their perceptions are important indicators of the effectiveness of the initiatives and provide useful direction for improving them (Sadler 1989; Segers & Dochy, 2001). As Lincoln (1995) argues, only when the views and responses of students are fully understood can education hope to be truly student-centred.

However, there are few studies of students’ perceptions of SBA in English Language in Hong Kong, and this paper fills some of the gap in the literature. It begins by exploring previous work on assessment feedback and students’ perceptions in Hong Kong and elsewhere. It then reports on a study carried out in three secondary schools regarding student perceptions and reactions to feedback. The paper concludes with some recommendations for appropriate treatment of assessment feedback which can contribute to the effective development of SBA in the new curriculum in Hong Kong.

SBA and Student Learning

SBA is premised upon the notion that regular, classroom-based assessment provides a reliable indicator of student learning, while also contributing feedback for future learning (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). Feedback is a ‘continuous, ongoing, and interactive’ process (Kouritzin & Vizard, 1999, 17) which involves multiple sources (teachers, peers, friends, and so on) and a variety of forms (visual, written and oral). The different modes and applications of feedback can have a significant impact on the ways students learn, especially if the feedback that has connections to different cognitive processes. Gaps in learning may be reduced by helping the students to modify or restructure their understandings, indicating where more information is needed, confirming to students that their answers are correct or incorrect, pointing out directions that the students might follow, and indicating alternative approaches to understanding particular information (Winne & Butler, 1994). Feedback pitched at the right level can enable students to grasp, use or develop strategies to process the objects of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Hargreaves (2011) argues that a learner finds feedback to be effective when it is not hurtful, or critical of a person’s character; when it is fair; and when it is clear that the intention is to help the learner. The effectiveness of feedback is also related to the capacity of students to understand and use it (Winne & Butler, 1994), and to their perceptions of its value (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). Positive impacts of feedback might be manifested through increased effort, motivation, or engagement in learning. However, evidence suggests that negative feedback can be more powerful than positive feedback (Brunit, Huguet & Monteil, 2000). Negative or poorly presented feedback is of little use if it does not help the learner to understand what to do or how to respond (Howie, Sy, Ford & Vicente, 2000). Such insights serve to remind us that students’ opinions are significant, as their perceptions of and responses to feedback are determinant factors of success in learning (Stiggins, 2007). In the Hong Kong context, the ascribed importance of assessment in English Language means that student voices are particularly worthy of attention.

A study on students’ perspectives of SBA in Hong Kong by Gao (2009, 116) showed that many students in one school held a positive outlook on the initiative, finding their participation in oral discussions to be “active and relaxed”, allowing them to demonstrate their actual abilities better. Yet there were diverse student views on the contribution of SBA and its associated feedback to improved learning. Some students thought it was highly beneficial while others complained that the feedback from their teacher was inadequate, although they agreed that good feedback was desirable. Gao’s project was a small-scale qualitative study, and the present study complements it by using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The Study

This research study explores the perceptions of students in three Hong Kong secondary schools regarding the SBA initiative and the feedback that emerges from SBA activities. Their reactions to SBA are also captured. In this study, feedback refers to both oral and written comments on students’ performance and learning provided to them directly by teachers. The three research questions are:

1. What are students’ overall perceptions of SBA in English Language?
2. How do students perceive and respond to assessment feedback from their teachers in the context of SBA in English Language?

The three schools were chosen as being representative of diverse educational environments: government and government-subsidized schools, with higher and lower academic achievers. A total of 451 questionnaires were collected from Secondary 5 students of the three schools, with 142, 128 and 153 students respectively providing usable responses (n=423). The questionnaire was designed with the language competence and general ability of the students in mind. It was bilingual (written in English and full-form Chinese characters, as used in Hong Kong). The questionnaire, which comprised 50 questions, was distributed by the English teacher to each group of participating students for them to self-administer its completion away from the classroom. The design of the questionnaire reflected a form of Delphi technique (Dalkey & Helmer, 2007) in that the questions were derived from the statements of the goals of SBA set out in the curriculum documents (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009b) and in the officially-sanctioned teacher professional development materials to accompany these documents (The University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009), and therefore represents the consolidated and moderated views of specialists who contributed to the development of SBA in the territory. The statements were arranged thematically and divided into three sections to facilitate the respondents' deliberations and the subsequent data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Section A required students to rate their perspectives of SBA in English Language. In Section B, they rated their perceptions of the assessment feedback they have been given in SBA. How they perceive their handling of this feedback was captured in Section C. A 6-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932) was used, with 1 representing "strongly disagree", 2 representing "generally disagree", 3 representing "disagree a little", 4 representing "agree a little", 5 "generally agree" and 6 representing "strongly agree". Descriptive statistical procedures (Mann, 2010) were used to analyze the responses, as the research questions did not require factor analysis or correlations. The mean of the responses and the standard deviations were calculated to indicate the trends of the students' perceptions and the extent of variation from the trends. The results are tabulated in Tables 1-3, with the number of student responses for each measure on the Likert scale expressed as a percentage of the total number of respondents for the particular item.

Semi-structured interviews, based on the themes emerging from the questionnaire, were also undertaken with 45 students to explore in more depth convergent and divergent messages captured by the questionnaires. Interviewees were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. To enhance the validity and reliability of the study, Cantonese, which was the students' mother tongue, was used in the interviews. The responses were transcribed, translated into English, and back-translated before being analyzed by the researchers individually and collectively to identify themes emerging from key words and messages.

Findings and Discussion

The study revealed that the students had mixed views regarding SBA in English Language. Generally speaking, they expressed reservations about the value of SBA as a mode of assessment and felt that they were unable to benefit from the feedback that they were receiving from their teachers.

Students' Perceptions of SBA in English Language

Students tended to have a negative impression of SBA in English Language (Table 1).

The items scoring the highest agreement (in terms of mean > 4.0) were critical in tone, namely, “SBA has no value in English” (item 21), “The amount of work for SBA in English is too much” (item 25), “SBA is unfair to students in English” (item 23) and “Students are over-assessed through SBA in English” (item 22). Over 70% of the students were not convinced that SBA provided them with a more enjoyable and less stressful assessment experience (item 4). Seven interviewees shared the view that now they had to attend extra classes, sometimes after school, to do the presentations in SBA and that resulted in resentment of SBA. They stressed that they had a lot other work to do and they could not devote so much time to SBA. The formative nature of SBA was not appreciated by four students. As one student commented, *“We have spent quite a bit of time on SBA, but I do not see much improvement in my English. I prefer doing more exam drills and practice.”*

The students seem to be sceptical about the capacity of SBA to perform the functions ascribed to it, such as advancing their learning and language skills (items 1, 5 and 6), or measuring their knowledge and skills (items 2, 3 and 12). Over 80% of the students remarked negatively about SBA results in one round of assessment being able to predict their performance in future rounds of SBA (item 20). Around 64% of the students agreed that SBA has little impact on their learning of English (item 24). The respondents were also critical of the teachers’ handling of SBA, as they responded unfavourably to the teachers’ use of their SBA results to judge what to teach next (item 19), their ability to track students’ progress through the use of SBA results (item 18), and to help students improve (item 19). Six interviewees claimed that they did not see how their SBA performance impacted upon their teachers’ teaching as the teachers had their own schedule to follow. They reported that it was left entirely up to the students to decide whether the feedback was taken up. *“Individual students’ need and progress were seldom attended to... Like us, my teacher seems to see scores as the indication of our improvement,”* one student reported.

Despite their apparent reservations about SBA, the students indicate that they are somewhat appreciative of their teacher’s understanding of SBA (item 7) and selection of appropriate tasks (item 9), and they feel that students prepare themselves well and are motivated for SBA (items 14 and 15). Three interviewees in fact praised their teachers for guiding them properly to understand what SBA requires and for designing activities that were closely aligned to the formal assessment tasks.

Table 1: Students’ Perception of SBA in English Language

	Strongly disagree ←————→ Strongly agree						N/R	N = 423	
	1	2	3	4	5	6		Mean	S.D.
1. My learning of English can advance through SBA.	14.9	23.4	27.3	26.6	7.1	0.6	0	2.90	1.20
2. SBA tasks can measure what I know in English.	17.0	18.3	30.7	24.8	7.8	1.3	0	2.92	1.24
3. SBA tasks can measure what I can do in English.	17.0	18.3	34.0	23.5	6.5	0.7	0	2.86	1.19
4. SBA is an engaging and enjoyable experience for me in English.	26.0	22.7	22.1	20.1	7.1	1.9	0	2.66	1.35
5. SBA can improve my English speaking skills.	14.9	18.8	26.0	22.7	17.5	--	0	3.09	1.31
6. SBA can improve my English reading skills.	14.9	19.5	27.3	27.3	9.7	1.3	0	3.01	1.26
7. My English teacher understands the requirements of SBA.	7.9	8.6	18.4	27.0	27.0	11.2	0	3.90	1.40
8. I understand the SBA	14.3	14.3	20.1	34.4	14.9	1.9	0	3.27	1.33

assessment criteria for English very well.									
9. The SBA tasks selected by my English teacher are appropriate.	10.4	11.0	20.8	31.8	24.0	1.9	0	3.54	1.30
10. The timetabling arrangements for SBA in English are appropriate.	15.7	17.6	24.2	31.4	11.1	--	0	3.05	1.25
11. The atmosphere is good in my English classes when we do SBA.	13.6	15.6	19.5	27.9	18.2	5.2	0	3.37	1.43
12. SBA is a way to determine how much I have learned from teaching.	20.1	20.8	28.6	22.1	7.1	1.3	0	2.79	1.27
13. SBA motivates me and my classmates to help each other in English	17.5	14.3	23.4	30.5	13.6	0.6	0	3.10	1.32
14. I take the time that is necessary to prepare for SBA in English.	10.5	12.4	18.3	28.1	15.7	15.0	3	3.71	1.52
15. I am motivated to do well in SBA in English.	10.4	11.0	23.4	28.6	18.2	8.4	0	3.58	1.40
16. I know how to prepare for SBA in English.	13.7	17.0	26.8	28.8	11.1	2.6	3	3.14	1.29
17. The teacher uses my SBA results to judge what to teach me next.	14.9	17.5	26.6	24.0	14.3	2.6	0	3.13	1.35
18. SBA helps my English teacher to track my progress.	21.4	20.8	24.7	24.7	7.1	1.3	0	2.79	1.30
19. My English teacher uses SBA to help me improve.	16.2	9.7	31.2	30.5	11.0	1.3	0	3.14	1.27
20. SBA results predict my future performance in English.	29.2	18.2	31.2	14.9	5.2	1.3	0	2.53	1.27
21. SBA has no value in English.	2.6	8.4	18.8	16.9	17.5	35.7	0	4.45	1.47
22. Students are over-assessed through SBA in English.	4.5	9.7	19.5	27.3	13.0	26.0	0	4.12	1.47
23. SBA is unfair to students in English.	1.3	13.1	26.1	16.3	15.7	27.5	2	4.14	1.47
24. SBA has little impact on my learning of English.	14.9	11.0	20.1	27.3	14.9	11.7	0	3.51	1.54
25. The amount of work for SBA in English is too much.	--	7.8	19.0	25.5	18.3	29.4	2	4.42	1.30

Key: N/R = no response

These results suggest that, generally speaking, the students acknowledge the importance of SBA as an assessment exercise, but they do not perceive or recognize the benefits of SBA as set out in the English Language curriculum documents and the professional development resources for teachers.

Students' Perceptions of and Responses to Feedback in the Context of SBA in English Language

In this section, students once again showed diversity in their perceptions, but were generally lukewarm towards the applicability of SBA in their learning (Table 2). The item

that produced the strongest agreement was item 40, “It is the responsibility of the teacher to give us feedback”. The relatively high means of 3.64 for “I understand the intention of the teacher in giving feedback” (item 26) and 3.60 for “I am positive about receiving feedback from my teacher” (item 32) suggest that the students realize that feedback can be worthy of their attention. The students obviously distinguish between the value of feedback and the value of SBA in English as a whole process, which they rated lowly (item 21 in Table 1).

Table 2: Students’ Perception of Assessment Feedback

	Strongly disagree ←————→ Strongly agree						N/R	N = 423	
	1	2	3	4	5	6		Mean	S.D.
26. I understand the intention of the teacher in giving feedback.	6.5	13.1	19.6	34.0	24.2	2.6	2	3.64	1.24
27. I receive the feedback that I want from the teacher.	9.7	14.9	24.7	31.8	16.9	1.9	0	3.37	1.26
28. I receive sufficient feedback from my teacher.	9.1	13.6	26.6	31.8	15.6	3.2	0	3.41	1.26
29. I receive timely feedback from my teacher.	7.8	14.9	26.6	32.5	14.9	3.2	0	3.42	1.23
30. The feedback is useful for my further study.	12.3	14.3	27.3	32.5	11.7	1.9	0	3.23	1.25
31. The feedback is well linked to the criteria for the 4 dimensions in English.	13.0	11.0	34.4	31.2	8.4	1.9	0	3.17	1.20
32. I am positive about receiving feedback from my teacher.	5.8	10.4	22.7	42.2	16.9	1.9	0	3.60	1.12
33. I understand the feedback given by the teacher.	7.8	11.1	20.9	38.6	20.3	1.3	3	3.56	1.20
34. I appreciate the way feedback is given by the teacher.	16.1	21.0	27.0	27.9	7.3	0.7	0	2.91	1.22
35. The feedback includes suggestions on how I can improve my learning.	11.8	14.5	28.3	28.3	14.5	2.6	2	3.27	1.29
36. The feedback given is usually specifically linked to individual tasks.	15.0	11.1	28.8	36.6	7.8	0.7	2	3.13	1.20
37. The feedback is usually very general and not particularly linked to specific tasks.	5.9	13.8	31.6	23.0	13.8	11.8	2	3.61	1.37
38. The teacher informs us of how we can make use of the feedback.	13.0	13.6	33.1	24.7	12.3	3.2	0	3.19	1.29
39. I find the feedback manageable and effective.	11.8	17.6	28.8	32.7	9.2	--	1	3.10	1.16
40. It is the responsibility of the teacher to give us feedback.	6.5	7.1	19.5	27.3	21.4	18.2	0	4.05	1.42

Key: N/R = no response

There were mixed perceptions of the handling of feedback by the English teachers, resulting in means between a low of 2.91 (item 34, “I appreciate the way feedback is given by the teacher”) and a high of 3.61 (item 37, “The feedback is usually very general and not

particularly linked to specific tasks”), both of which indicate a negative perception. In the interviews, 20 students were not satisfied with the general feedback given as it was not particularly relevant to one specific task, such as “*You need to structure your presentation with an introduction and then in the end you repeat and conclude your view.*” Yet the students yearned for the specific language and discourse (such as appropriate phrases and words) that could help them connect their ideas and organize their work for the particular task. The feedback on the pronunciation and intonation was seen as valuable, as reported by seven of the interviewees. However, they were concerned that the correct utterance of some words and sentences did not seem to have helped them to do other tasks that were of a different nature and topic and required a completely different set of vocabulary.

The results for how teachers give feedback and its quality demonstrate mixed perceptions on the part of the students. Around 40% of the students reported that the teacher informed them of how they can make use of the feedback (item 38), while 64% of the respondents did not appreciate the way feedback was provided (item 34). Around 58% of the respondents felt that feedback was not well linked to the criteria in the four dimensions of English Language being assessed (item 31). Most of the interviewees (29) also stated that feedback was brief and unfocused. They also found it difficult to keep record of the verbal feedback and they had no ideas as to how to handle it systemically. In the end, most of remarks were forgotten and what remained were some general comments that were too general to be useful in specific tasks. This explains why around 60% of the students disagreed that the feedback was manageable and effective (item 39) and no student selected the ‘strongly agree’ option.

In addition, the teachers’ comments were often considered lopsided by 19 interviewees, as a large proportion of feedback, if there was any, was devoted to bits and pieces of language items, (for example, the correct use of tenses, the need for a variety of adjectives to describe events or feelings, and some formulaic expressions such as “I am afraid I disagree with what you have said”, “To the best of my knowledge” for memorizing). It emerged that teachers seldom provided examples of language patterns and ideas at the textual level. The students reported that their teachers preached that accuracy in vocabulary and grammar was the priority, and the basis for constructing correct sentences. Five interviewees would actually have preferred viewing examples of longer spoken texts so that they could have concrete ideas on how contents could be expressed more naturally and fluently. Eight other interviewees suggested that the inclusion of some appropriate follow-up activities in class should enable to them to practise problematic aspects specified in the feedback.

Less than 50% of the students believed that the feedback they received was useful for their further study (item 30). Six interviewees reported that they could not generalize their learning from one task for use in another task and they viewed each individual assessment task as a single entity. Fourteen interviewees could not relate feedback to the improvement of their performance in SBA. Four respondents in fact did not see how they could transfer their learning in SBA to other aspects of English learning. Three students said that sometimes feedback was given by teachers to fill up the class time and for fulfilling the SBA requirements. They felt no genuine concern for their work and they definitely did not see it as a learning opportunity to further develop their English competence.

On a positive note, five interviewees found some of the assessment feedback could stimulate higher-level thinking and learning, and that helped structure the learning process for work that was carried out in groups. A few students understood the teachers’ actions were guided by the pedagogical intention to monitor progress, and also showed a certain positive attitude towards using assessment information for their own learning. However, they did argue that clearer expectations in the feedback could bring about better learning. For example, one interviewee pointed out, “*The teacher can set goals for us and set tasks that allow us to use the target language or content.*”

Eleven interviewees expressed a preference for one-to-one consultations with the teachers, as feedback delivered to or in front of the whole class tended to be negative and threatening to individual students' "face". However, they valued feedback when it was couched encouragingly, and oriented towards the metacognitive and linguistic aspects of planning and conducting specific tasks.

In general, most of the interviewees agreed that teachers provide some sort of feedback either immediately after the task if time allowed, or in certain circumstances, through later comments on their work. They concluded that the frequency of feedback depended very much on whether time was available, as their teachers also stressed that there were many other items on the syllabus to cover for examinations.

There is a wide spread in the responses to the questions about how students respond to SBA in English Language (Table 3). 73% of the students reported that they did not keep a record of the feedback and results they received, with a mean of 2.86.

Table 3: Students' reactions to SBA

	Strongly disagree ← → Strongly agree						N/R	N = 423	
	1	2	3	4	5	6		Mean	S.D.
41. I keep a record of the feedback and results I receive.	16.3	18.3	37.9	20.3	5.2	2.0	2	2.86	1.19
42. I ignore the feedback I receive from SBA.	15.6	29.2	27.9	13.0	6.5	7.8	0	2.89	1.42
43. I look at what I got wrong or did poorly to decide what I should learn next.	9.7	13.0	22.7	33.1	17.5	3.9	0	3.47	1.30
44. I can work out how to use feedback to improve my language.	17.5	15.6	29.2	29.9	7.8	--	0	2.95	1.21
45. I can monitor my learning based on the work and feedback provided	16.9	16.2	26.6	29.2	10.4	0.6	0	3.02	1.27
46. I work with other students to improve my SBA performance.	13.6	11.7	27.3	32.5	13.6	1.3	0	3.25	1.26
47. I can apply my other (non-SBA) learning in English to SBA.	13.6	17.5	31.2	29.2	6.5	1.9	0	3.03	1.21
48. I will spend more time than before in preparing for future SBA.	19.6	20.9	29.4	20.9	7.8	1.3	4	2.80	1.27
49. I will seek more help from the teacher than before in preparing for future SBA.	20.3	20.3	32.0	18.3	8.5	0.7	3	2.76	1.24
50. I rely on the teacher to help me plan ways to improve.	10.5	7.8	17.6	28.1	17.6	18.3	3	3.90	1.53

Key: N/R = no response

However, the tendency is for students to see feedback as useful in the new assessment context (item 42, "I ignore the feedback I receive from SBA" produced a relatively low mean of 2.89). Four interviewees added that they might take more notice of feedback on the formal assessment rather than on practice tasks. Four interviewees confessed that they are just concerned about their grades and feedback was just a cosmetic exercise. One student frankly disclosed, "I am not interested in dwelling on the feedback I receive. I just move on to the next task."

A proportion of the students did report that they looked at where they went wrong or did poorly to decide what they should learn next (item 43, with a mean of 3.47). However, they appeared to lack strategies for handling the feedback themselves, being weak at monitoring their own learning based on feedback (item 45) and working out how to use feedback to improve their language (item 44). Further elaboration by 25 interviewees indicates that they were unsure whether the strategies or changes they adopted could truly demonstrate their understanding of the feedback. A couple of interviewees blamed the teachers for lacking comprehensive understanding of SBA and for providing unfocused feedback which undermined the students' development of effective error detection skills and self-regulated strategies to improve their learning and performance. The potential of feedback to sustain effective learning was dubious, as 19 interviewees also reported that their teachers did not monitor their progress in applying the feedback.

61% of the respondents did not have clear ideas of how to connect other aspects of learning in English with SBA (item 47), which may impede their improvement or understanding of the reciprocal relationship between SBA and English learning. Although slightly over 50% of the students stated that they would work with other students to improve their SBA performance (item 46) because of the group work nature in one of the components, only 27% of the respondents would seek more help from the teacher than before in preparing for future SBA (item 49), signalling a passive learning attitude of the students—assuming that the teacher should be ready to support them any time. One interviewee argued, *“The teacher should know what we need and provide us help. We don't know their schedule of teaching and what we have to learn.”* Instead, the majority (64%) stated that they relied on the teacher to help them plan ways to improve (item 50). This result resonates with their similar response about the teacher's responsibility to give them feedback (item 40) and further underscores the student perception that teachers should take control of the feedback process in SBA.

How students construe teachers' assessment practices and their use of feedback also affects the amount of effort they put into improving their learning. Interestingly, the four interviewees who attributed a pedagogical intention in how their teachers used feedback were also the only students who actively strove to use the assessment feedback to enhance their learning. They were also able to recount ways in which they made use of feedback. For example, one recalled, *“I keep a notebook on which I record the teacher's teaching and feedback. I put them under the four criteria of SBA assessment. Very often when I prepare for the presentation, I will refer back to the notes to help plan my work.”* In contrast, eleven students who did not detect any particular pedagogical intention underpinning the teacher's assessment practice were less capable of using the feedback effectively to improve their SBA performance. They valued feedback less.

In general around 70% (mean 2.80 of item 48) of the respondents reported spending less time than before in preparing for future SBA. Seven students in the interviews did not value SBA and reacted to the feedback on instrumental grounds. They all concurred that SBA only takes up 15% of the total score in English and though they did not get high assessment grades, they believed that spending more time on it would not help push up the overall result. They preferred working harder on other aspects such as reading and writing.

Conclusion

Student voices are to be valued because their perceptions influence how they learn and affect the quality of their learning. They are thus an important consideration for effective policymaking, and also for effective implementation in the classroom (Segers & Dochy, 2001). By participating in decision-making, students can learn life skills that are useful for

civic engagement, future employment and personal development. Their voices often provide an alternative perspective. In this study, students demonstrate wide-ranging perceptions of assessment, and many of these perceptions are not necessarily in line with the intentions of teachers, schools or education policymakers. The data suggest there is a mismatch between the kind of assessment promoted by the SBA initiative and students' expectations of assessment and related feedback. The semi-structured interviews also found that the majority of the students were dissatisfied with the feedback that they received from teachers, considering it to be insubstantial, piecemeal, short-sighted, overly discrete and not sufficiently honed for improving their learning of English or their performance in future SBA activities.

On a positive note, the study reveals that assessment feedback was seen by many of the students as a help for their learning. However, they seem to be less convinced that SBA provides an efficient vehicle for generating useful feedback and unsure of what to do with the feedback that they receive. When placed alongside studies such as those by Hargreaves (2011) and Tong (2011), the results suggest that the SBA initiative requires careful and skilful implementation if it is to be truly effective. First, the initiative must match the cultural context in which it will be embedded (Adamson, 2011). This necessitates attention not only to factors such as school ethos, parental expectations and teachers' beliefs and practices, but also to students' beliefs and practices, including role expectations for themselves and their teachers. The tentativeness with which SBA is being introduced into English Language in Hong Kong reflects policymakers' respect for the strong tradition of, and preferences for, centralised, one-off examinations. Students find SBA comparatively time-consuming and many fail to see the benefits for learning that might accrue. Second, teachers need to be skilled in providing feedback and enabling the students to make use of it to enhance their learning in an increasingly autonomous manner. This may require the provision of professional development courses for teachers when they lack experience, expertise and confidence in implementing SBA (Davidson, 2007). There may also be a need for explicit training for students in benefitting from feedback. Once the students perceive the value of good-quality feedback for their learning, their negative dispositions towards SBA may be alleviated.

This paper is a small-scale exploratory study and, as such, the findings need to be viewed with some circumspection and require further investigation. Nonetheless, an emergent theme is the variety of responses to feedback from SBA activities. Some students appreciate it; others do not. Some view assessment and feedback as having a formative function; others view them more instrumentally—assessments are to be passed, and the grades indicate pass or failure. Neither of these perceptions of the functions of assessment and feedback is superior to the other—they simply represent different orientations. The challenge facing curriculum developers is to find ways to incorporate a range of assessments—formal and informal; standardised and school-based—in a balanced and principled manner, while teachers (and students) would benefit from an on-going dialogue to ensure that feedback derived from the various sources is turned into a powerful assistant to learning. These challenges need to be addressed from the initiation of assessment reform to avoid dilution of its impact.

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