



Improving Continuous Assessment Practice in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

The paper examined the improvement of continuous assessment (CA) practice in Nigerian Schools to enhance teaching and learning. CA is a holistic approach that systematically obtains information about the knowledge, interest, attitude, behavior, skills and potentials of learners. This is done at predetermined intervals to reap the benefits of CA. Teachers, parents, principals' and Ministry of education officials commitments to its use should be revived. The practice of CA should be monitored and should provide opportunity for feedback to students, parents and stakeholders.

Key words: Continuous assessment, comparability, systematic, cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains

INTRODUCTION

Before the introduction of continuous assessment (CA), primary and secondary schools in Nigeria based their assessment and promotion of learners on the result of the promotion examinations that usually come up at the end of each academic session. Through the result of such one-shot examinations, summary judgments were passed on the child's learning and achievement. According to Mkpa (1989) teachers taught almost exclusively for the purpose of passing these examinations and students started with cheating of diverse sorts to pass the examinations. More daring learners, usually more insecure students went out for live papers.

In addition, Adebule and Ayodele (2005) affirmed that parents and guardians even go to the extent of arranging for their children and wards in order to have better assessment value. They added that some students registered for various certificate examinations at centers where malpractices and manipulations reign supreme for the purpose of having good grades. Okoro (1998) argued that premium placed on certificates encourage cheating, corruption, examination leakages and forms of examination malpractices thereby doing more damage than good.

With the adoption of continuous assessment, it is expected that examination malpractices would be reduced if not totally eliminated and give way for meaningful learning in all areas of life. The 6-3-3-4 system as envisaged in the National Policy on Education clearly spelt out the parameters and modalities by which performance will be evaluated. The Policy advocates a continuous assessment procedure as the standard method of evaluation. It is aimed at not only finding how much a child has acquired in terms of learning skills but also taking into account the personal and social development of the child.

Concept of Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment is not continuous testing of the cognitive ability of students; but what is practiced in many schools today is continuous testing where teachers administer tests on students on a fortnightly or monthly basis. Then, what is continuous assessment? It is not an exaggeration that various individuals and organizations have given various definitions to continuous assessment.

The National Steering Committee on Continuous Assessment defined continuous assessment as a systematic method of ascertaining what a pupil has gained from schooling in terms of knowledge, industry and character development, taking into consideration all his/her performances in tests, assignments, projects and other educational activities during a given period of term, year or during the entire period of an educational level. Continuous assessment according to Ojerinde (1986) is the systematic or regular testing of students between terms, sessions, or throughout the duration of course of study for the purposes of measuring or assessing the students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of behaviour.

Continuous assessment as defined by Federal Ministry of Science and Technology (1985) is a mechanism whereby the final grading of students in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of behaviour take account of all his performances during a given period of schooling. This definition takes care of the activities of students, both inside and outside the classroom. Also, such assessment involves a great variety of modes of evaluation for the purpose of grading and improving the learning and performance of the students.

In their definition, Okpala, Onacha and Oyedeji (1993) refer to continuous assessment as a system of assessment which is carried out at pre-determined intervals for the purpose of monitoring and improving the overall performance of students and of the teaching-learning environment. In this definition, the predetermined interval means there is a plan of operation which is uniform for all schools in the educational system. For such a plan to work effectively, the steps and activities it contains should be implemented in a systematic fashion to ensure uniformity and comparability. Also, the overall performance according to Okpala et al (1993) involves looking at a student in totality to ensure an all round development of the intellectual skills, the affective and psychomotor behaviour of the students.

According to McTighe and Ferrara (1994) continuous assessment refers to the process of gathering and integrating information about learners from various sources to help us understand the students and describe them. This may consist of a variety of measure and procedures that a teacher can use to tell whether his/her instruction has been effective and to target those students who have and have not mastered particular skills.

Continuous assessment is a student-evaluation system that operates at the classroom level and is integrated with instructional process (Capper, 1996). Continuous assessment puts the learners more in control of his/her own learning. It offers a way to provide differential input depending on the needs of learners and can help to improve the quality of instruction. Also, continuous assessment is meant to be integrated with teaching in order to improve learning and to help shape and direct the teaching-learning process.

The different assessment approaches and methods (types) according to Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1999) are as follows:

Selected Response Items	Performance-Based Assessments			
	Constructed Responses	Products	Performances	Process Focused
Multi-choice True-false Matching	Fill in the blank - Word(s) - Phrase(s) Short answer Sentence(s) - Paragraph(s) - Label of diagram - Show your work" Visual representation - Web - Concept Map - Flow Chart - Graph/table - Matrix - Illustration	Essay Research paper Log/Journal Lab report Story/play Poem Portfolio Art exhibit Science project Model Video/audiotape Spreadsheet	Oral presentation Dance/movement Science lab Demonstration Athletic competition Dramatic reading Enactment Debate Musical recital	Oral questioning Observation ("kid watching") interview Conference Process description "thing aloud" learning log

Fig i: Example of Continuous Assessment Approaches.

Source: MBEC (1999).

Majority of assessment approaches are not tests, but are performance based. Performance based assessments allow learners to consult a response, create a product, or perform a demonstration to show what they understand and can do. In assessing students, an assessor should select the assessment method that can best measure the objectives and competencies that he or she seeks information about.

In her contribution, Puhl (1999) said the concept of continuous assessment hold rich potential for creative and critical thinking and it embraces not only cognitive outcomes but affective and behavioural outcomes as well. Greenwood and Matheady (1997) affirmed that students' performance measure should include skills that clearly show their progress through a sequence of preserve professional development activities and demonstrate growth.

From the various definitions, one can deduce that continuous assessment involves collection of vital data about the individual, integration of information, the influence of social interaction, problem solving, the importance of environment and individual needs, importance of detailed cumulative records, self assessment, improving teaching-learning, importance of valid judgement on the individual, and given feedback to learners, teachers, parents and stakeholders.

Rationale for Continuous Assessment

The continuous assessment procedure is predicated on certain basic principles, according to Ojerinde and Falayajo (1984), Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (1985) and Majasan (1988). These are that:

- i. the learners performance throughout the entire period of schooling is likely to be more valid and serving as his overall ability than a single examination.
- ii. assessment is an integral part of the teaching process and therefore the teachers should be involed in the final assessment of the pupils he or she has taught.
- iii. the readiness of teachers to introduce innovations into their teaching is often frustrated by the fact that a final examination does not take account of such innovations. In a Continuous Assessment situation, the teacher's assessment of the performance of students on such innovation can become a part of the final assessment. The teacher should therefore be encouraged to be flexible and innovative.
- iv. an improtant aspect of instruction is the appropriate guidance of the child both in his/her learning and preparation for a career. Continuous assessment facilitates such guidance in a school.
- v. a teacher needs to assess his/her own instructional methods from time to time in order to improve his/her performance. Data from continuous assessment can be useful to the teacher for such self assessment.
- vi. for several years, Nigeria and indeed many West African Countries have been plagued with the occurrence of examination leakages and other malpractices especially in the West African School Certificate Examination.

It has been suggested that the only reason for the high incidence of malpractices in SSCE and other examinations is the fact that the single final examination is so crucial in deciding the fate of the candidates that the temptation to ensure success by all means (fair or foul) is very high. It is believed that if continuous assessment is employed, this temptation would be considerably reduced. But it seems people still misconstrue the idea of continuous assessment to be synonymous with the way it is being practiced.

Bandele (1991) opined out that evaluation procedure in Nigeria for whatever purpose or at what level, still appears to be judgmental, norm-reference and summative. The situation, after more than a decade, appears to be the same. The Namimbia Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1999) reported that teachers in Namimbia, where continuous assessment has been implemented as an assessment innovation, have asked for assistance with the implementation of Continuous assessment. The feeling of many teachers in Namimbia is quoted as thus:

I have some fears about the introduction of this continuous assessment of the moment. We have been told in a vague way about it. We still have no thorough understanding of it. I see a lot of confusion in our schools about this. Teachers talk of continuous assessment but it seems as if they have different versions of what it means. What is this continuous assessment? Why is it being introduced now? (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 1999).

The above is not only applicable to Namibia, the case of Nigeria seems not to be different. Many teachers seem not to understand the meaning, purpose and practice continuous assessment. Ogunneye (1992) noted that majority of teachers in our schools do not understand why they have to give continuous assessment tests, mark and analyze the results of such tests. He argued that some teachers, because of their ignorance of the meaning and purpose of continuous assessment, see it as an introduction capable of wasting their time, energy and materials. In such situation, what would one expect from such teachers? How valid and reliable are the scores generated?

Emeke (1994) highlighted the objectives of continuous assessment to include:

- i. Regular assessing of the students and the proper recording of scores from such assessments
- ii. Meticulous record keeping of every facet of the student's life while in school.
- iii. Testing of the three major domains: cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of the students.
- iv. The identification of students' difficulties and the re-teaching of such difficult topics.
- v. Giving of feedback to teachers so as to enable them assess their own performance
- vi. Identification of the personality of each student including the temperament, interest, attitude and so on.
- vii. Provision of guidance and counselling to help students in their learning as well as career development and adjustment.
- viii. The use of a variety of evaluation techniques
- ix. Using all the scores in all the tests (cognitive, affective and psychomotor) for the final grading and placement of each student.
- x. Setting up of continuous assessment committees in schools.

Each of the objectives has implications for the practice of continuous assessment in our schools.

Continuous assessment no doubt plays vital roles in any educational system and its results are used for a multiplicity of purpose viz: selection, appraisal and classification of instructional objectives, diagnosis of students' strength and weakness among others.

Sally (1996) kicked against the assessment system that:

- i. are crumbling beneath the burden of inefficient mark recording systems, with students being given incorrect marks or getting them so late that they can not help remediate the deficiencies.
- ii. do not give students a second chance when they fail (which nowadays often has disastrous personal and financial consequences).
- iii. assess the wrong thing or same range of things too often, so we do not get a fair and realistic overview of what our students can achieve.

- iv. place under reliance on recall, rather than enable students to transfer and apply what they have learned to different concepts and problems.

Continuous assessment should be a good indicator to the learners, parents, teachers and school administrators if effectively done. Contributing, Diatal, Herman and Kunth (1991) maintained that good assessment information provides accurate estimates of students' performance and enable teachers or other decision makers to make appropriate decisions.

For example, before you teach, you must plan the learning activities your learners will do, what objectives or outcomes you want the learners to achieve and how you will assess the learners. Planning for assessment here means that you know before you begin to teach, what assessment methods you will use, why you want to use them and when you will use them.

Bello (1985) enumerated the merits of continuous assessment when he stated that continuous assessment is capable of encouraging regularity and even punctuality of pupils at classes or lessons; that a judgment arrived at of a pupil through the combination of examination and continuous assessment is likely to be more reliable than that based on just end-of-year examination. The use of continuous assessment makes a pupil work harder and be sure of his progress and likelihood of success at the end of the course, and that continuous assessment reduces the threat factor in examination which drives some students to cheat at final examination or break down in bodily or mental health during examination periods.

Characteristics of Continuous Assessment

The characteristics of continuous assessment as noted in the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (1985) which evaluator and educators have emphasized include that continuous assessment is systematic, cumulative, comprehensive and guidance oriented. These characteristics no doubt have implication for teaching-learning process.

Continuous assessment being systematic refers to the specific nature of the measuring tools or instruments and the regularity or frequency of assessment (Ohuche, 1983). The systematic nature of continuous assessment is geared towards ensuring a planned approach to assessment and comparability of standards within the country. Thus it requires an operational plan which specifies the measurement that are to be made of the pupils performance, the time intervals or times of the school year when such measurement are to be made and results recorded in addition to the tools or instrument or strategies to be used in the measurement. Eso (2000) reported that any school that is involved in continuous assessment must have to adopt a definite programme which of course should be made known to all, especially all those who are directly involved-students, teachers, Ministry of Education officials and possibly parents.

Continuous assessment being comprehensive denotes that many types of instruments are used in ascertaining the performance of pupils and that all levels of cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains are assessed (Alonge, 1987). Thus the use of a variety of instruments, such as tests, observation, projects assignments, questionnaire, interviews, sociometric techniques and so on to determine students performance. These are used to make summary decisions which is based on information gathered in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains to be referred to as comprehensiveness of continuous assessment.

The cumulative aspect of continuous assessment indicates that not only are there to be repeated measurement but that all these measurements should be taken into account in

presenting a picture of a student at any point in time. The implication of this being that, the final grade at the end of the year for each student, should integrate not only the last measurement for the year but also, in some degree all the assessment throughout the school year. As contained in the National Policy on Education, assessment of the end of primary, junior and secondary levels must reflect this cumulative nature (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Thus, the need to keep up to date and cumulative records on individual student arises.

Majasan (1988), Aderounmu & Adetuberu (1992) agreed that keeping of records is a problem in the conduct of continuous assessment and these records are expected to be cumulative from class to class and from school to school. Hence, there is the need for uniformity of standard. How possible is it for several thousand of teachers or schools to keep accurate records with a uniform? Besides, some teachers/schools cannot boast of having accurate records of their students within a session not to talk of having records of successive years. But with the use of modern technology, records keeping could be easily facile where the materials are available.

Continuous assessment is said to be guidance oriented because information obtained is used to guide the pupils' further development (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 1985). One of the values of assessment in education as would be agreed by educators is that it can assist to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses in student's performance, the teacher's instructional strategies or procedures and the curriculum and educational programmes itself (Bandeled, 1991, & Alonge, 2004). Obviously, the information obtained can be utilized as basis for encouraging student's efforts remedial work and necessary improvement of techniques of instruction.

Commenting on guidance-oriented evaluation which to him is analogues to formative evaluation, Yoloye (1979) expressed the ideal that guidance –oriented evaluation is associated with a smaller load of threat and has its basis of operation the pre-disposition to assist the pupils succeed in his or her educational endeavour. According to him, formative evaluation and guidance oriented evaluation are the most important kind of evaluation and what education is all about. If continuous assessment is operated judiciously and effectively, taking care of these characteristics to the fullest, there is bound to be bright future for the country's educational system.

- i. Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1999) maintained that good continuous assessment should be based on three premises.
- ii. The purpose of continuous assessment is to inform teaching and to improve learning while there is still time to do so;
- iii. Sound continuous assessment calls for graded assessments that are based on several methods of assessment.
- iv. Continuous assessment must be valid, reliable and fair.

The Practice of Continuous Assessment in Nigeria

The practice of continuous assessment in Nigeria provided for by the National Policy on Education as a way of improving the evaluation process has been relegated to the background by the teachers who have no time for the exercise (Okafor, 2001). For instance, Nzewi (1990) appraised the use of continuous assessment in three Local Government Areas in the then Anambra State, eight years after the introduction of continuous assessment in schools. He observed that at that period, the teachers were only aware of the programme but lacked the commitment to implement it. He concluded that the programme could not be said to be functional in the schools where his study was conducted.

Many countries, including Nigeria, have been using course grade in conjunction with end-of-cycle examination marks to make promotion, certificate and selection decisions. The advantage of doing this according to Capper (1996) is to increase the emphasis on the day-to-day learning that occurs in the classroom and to increase the accuracy of the selection and certificate and decisions. The recommendations of National Steering Committee on continuous assessment on the weights to be used in combining school assessment with final examination at the end of the junior secondary school are 40% and 60% respectively. It is felt that the weights should increase progressively. These weights according to Ojerinde and Falayajo (1984) are based on the following assumptions

- i. In order not to unduly penalize a pupil who might be poor at the beginning but has been making a steady progress that he/she has reached a high level of performance at the end of the course;
- ii. To discourage complacency on the part of the initially brilliant pupil. The weights spread across the three years as follows: 10% for J.S.S.1, 20% for J.S.S. II, 30% for JSS III (1st and 2nd terms) 40% for state test.

Ojerinde (1985) called these the ratio in (ii) above 1:2:3:4 formulae for combining scores. The individual schools continuous assessment scores would hence account for a total of 60% of the final cumulative scores. Simply put, the JSS III final cumulative will be shared as follows: 60% school test scores, 40% state test scores.

On the contrary, Kolawole (2005) reported that continuous assessment scores spread across the three years as follows: 5% for JSS I, 12.5% for JSS II, 12.5% for JSS III and 70% for the State test. He added that continuous assessment scores is 30% while theory paper in state examination is 30% and objective is 40%. However, whichever ever is the case, continuous assessment scores take certain percentage of the overall score. Ojerinde (1985) asked these questions to assess the practicability of the CA in school: (i) who will convert the scores to whatever weights that is adapted? (ii) How much can we rely on the scores sent by the schools?

Moreover, in recent times, the situation is worse; the ratio of continuous assessment marks and final examination marks according to Okarfor (2001) vary from one school to another ranging from 10:90, through 30:70 to 50:50. Some schools resorted to the one-short end-of-course examination which have been criticized for having repressive and restricting effects on both the teachers and the students and which in recent time has high degree of examination malpractices (West African Examination Council, 1999).

Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1999) argued that continuous assessment and end-of-year examinations are meant to complement one another. Both continuous assessment and examination assess objective and competencies specified in subject syllabuses. Linn, Baker and Dunbar (1991) maintained that continuous assessment practices are intended to be more authentic to involve students in the desired competency in a portfolio. When continuous assessment is done properly, they should predict performance in the end of year examination.

Puhl (1997) affirmed that the traditional ways of testing such as essay or multiple choice examinations can sample a fraction of what we want to produce. Examination mark alone proved an incomplete picture of what a student has learned and emphasize only an aspect of a complex set of understanding, knowledge and skills (Capper, 1996). He added that the greater

the number of assessment that are used in making judgment about the students, the greater likelihood that the judgment will be accurate.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, after more than three decades, there is still lack of understanding of continuous assessment and thus, the process of CA is not functioning well in schools. The practice is still judgmental and records not well secured, which give room for threat factors in examinations. Continuous assessment in practice is expected to embody the global changes that affect the very nature of the classroom process, bringing it away from education as only information recall and toward the full development of learners' potential. It is recommended that continuous assessment should be well and objectively planned to evaluate students' performance on a series of assessment tasks. In addition, it should involve more time and also provide opportunity for feedback, and a comprehensive assessment of the objectives to be achieved and competences to be assessed.

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