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The Practice of Continuous Assessment in Primary Schools: The Case of Chagni, Ethiopia

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Abstract
Continuous assessment is part and parcel of instructional process that has to be taken as a key tool in educational quality assurance endeavor. Thus, this article examined the actual practice of continuous assessment in primary schools of Chagni City Administration, Ethiopia. To address this purpose the study employed descriptive survey design. The data collected from randomly selected sample of 72 primary school teachers was analyzed by using one-sample t-test. There is discrepancy between the perceived purpose of continuous assessment and its actual practice. In conclusion, the practice of continuous assessment in primary schools lacks harmony and consistency. Developing harmonized continuous assessment policy or guideline is forwarded to the government as recommendation.
Keywords: continuous assessment, practice, primary school, assessment for learning

1. Introduction

Nowadays, in the world of education, continuous assessment has been recognized as an integral part of everyday classroom instruction and a key tool to ensure quality learning. Accordingly, every educational institution, in Ethiopia, irrespective of its level, has been using continuous assessment as a key to determine students' learning achievement and identify their learning difficulties for special supports, to improve teacher's pedagogical practices, and to improve quality of education in general. In line to this, Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE, 1994) pinpointed in New Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia that continuous assessment in academic and practical subjects will be conducted to ascertain the formation of all round profile of students at all levels. Moreover, Ministry of Education (MoE, 2011:119) pointed out that

> An essential element of the move to personalized learning is the use of assessment for learning (formative assessment) as well as assessment of learning (summative assessment). Teachers are encouraged to use a range of assessment techniques that are appropriate to the learning activities of the students in order to fulfill the primary aim of assessment which is to support learning.

Undoubtedly, effective practice of CA yields great contribution in the campaign to assure quality of education. In this regard, CA has abundant purposes to serve including improvement of the teaching and learning process and motivating students to work harder, and thus, its success should be measured in terms opportunities it provide for educational quality enhancement. In light of this, National Science Teachers Association (NSTA, 2003) contends that an assessment operates to improve student learning, not solely to measure it, when it is used to move the student from his or her current understanding to where the student would like to be. Similarly, UNICEF(2000) cited in the General Education Quality Assurance and Examinations Agency(GEQAEA,2008) pointed out that frequent assessment and feedback is the one of the variables that contribute to better student learning outcomes and quality of education. Similarly, research findings by Birhanu (2013) and Desalegn (2014) documented that CA is a good practice for improving students' performance, monitoring students' learning progress, improving methods of teaching, motivating and grading students' achievement. However, the benefits of assessment can be enjoyed only if it is based on learning objectives (ENQA, 2007; Earl, 2006 cited in Yared, 2012). Thus, to ensure effective teaching of subject matter and to help students acquire the required knowledge, skill and attitude every teacher should maintain good practice continuous assessment.

As to Kapambwe (2010), the objectives of the CA are twofold: firstly, to promote the use of formative assessment so as to improve the quality of learning and teaching and secondly, to establish a regular system of managing implementation of the programme or curricula. Similarly, Arega(2014) has documented that there is considerable evidence that continuous assessment is a powerful instrument for enhancing the attainment of learning outcomes to ensure quality education and academic excellence in the education institutions.

In the broadest sense, as learning is the main reason schools exist, every school needs to systematize the way learning is continuously assessed within the school. While discussing about continuous assessment, it is scholarly recommended to view it in light of assessment of learning, assessment as learning and assessment for learning. This entails that student learning should be continuously assessed and timely feedback should be given so that it is possible to capitalize on the outcome of the assessment and take possible action (re-teaching and re-assessment) for better learning (HESC, 2012).

Despite acknowledgement of the importance of CA by abundant educators, its practice is evidenced with tremendous pitfalls. In connection to this, Esere and Idowu (2009) found out that CA has not made the

expected contribution to students' school performance due to inherent problems in its operation. Similarly, Diamond (1998) described that the fundamental problem in assessment practices to be the mismatch between the learning targets established and the methods and criteria teachers use to assess their students. Moreover, Fisseha (2010) found that the current state of assessment, particularly formative assessment (also named as assessment for learning) is not in line with best practices to enhance student learning and realize curriculum intentions.

Tremendous literatures and scientific evidences have revealed that many educators and learners view CA as merely assessment of learning (summative), barring assessment for learning (formative) away. For instance, Obioma(2010) cited in Awofala and Babajide(2013) has investigated that many teachers misapplied the CA instruments leading to more continuous testing instead of continuous assessment. Aytaged (2010) further asserted that judgmental role (summative) of continuous assessment is more practiced than the development role (formative) of the assessment. Similarly, some other studies also pinpointed the following findings viz., teachers practice continuous assessment as continuous tests (Abiy, 2013), practice of the CA activities to assess students' written work is not sufficient enough to improve the learning and teaching of a writing course (Yiheyis and Getachew, 2014) and judgmental role of continuous assessment is more practiced than the development role of the assessment (Aytaged, 2013). Moreover, as documented by different researchers, some other problems found were that the entire practice of CA is surrounded by laxity (Birhanu, 2013), the assessment methods that instructors use are not effective in promoting good learning(Black & William, 2004 cited in Fisseha, 2010), teachers experienced difficulties in implementation of formative assessment (Israel, 2005 cited in Mpapalika, 2013), teachers are complaining that CA increases the workload for teachers (Mpapalika, 2013), etc.

To this end, the aforementioned findings have clearly revealed the existing deficiencies in the practice of continuous assessment. As to the researcher's experience and informal observation, Chagni City Administration primary schools seem to face certain problems in the practice of continuous assessment. Thus, as there is no previous study that addressed this problem in the area, this article has examined the prevailing practices of continuous assessment in the primary schools of Chagni City Administration, Ethiopia.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 What is Continuous Assessment (CA)?

Different authors have defined continuous assessment differently based on their point of emphasis. Accordingly, Asabe (2007 cited in Abiy, 2013) defines CA as a classroom process that is integrated with instruction. Similarly, Falayalo (1986) and Juliet (2007), viewing it as an integral part of instruction, considers it as a mechanism whereby the final grading of learners on the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning is made(cited in Abiy, 2013). Nitko (2004), on the other hand, described it as an information gathering tool that helps teachers select content and method of instruction.

According to Nitko (2004),

> *Continuous Assessment is an ongoing process of gathering and interpreting information about student learning that is used in making decisions about what to teach and how well students have learned (p.4).*

Another definition by Airasian(1991) describes CA as an assessment approach which should depict the full range of sources and methods teachers use to gather, interpret and synthesize information about learners.

2.2 Contemporary Thoughts of Continuous Assessment: Assessment for Learning (AfL), Assessment of Learning (AoL) and Assessment as Learning (AaL)

2.2.1 Assessment for Learning (AfL)

Now a day, emphasis of curriculum assessment shifts from summative (assessment of learning) to formative assessment (assessment for learning) to meet the dynamic needs of learners. Thus, in assessment *for* learning, teachers use assessment as an investigating tool to find out as much as they can about what their students know and can do, and what confusions, preconceptions, or gaps they might have. Therefore, investigation results provide the basis for determining what teachers need to do next to move student learning forward. In this regard, Okas(n.d.:4) contend that:

> …assessment *for* Learning shifts the emphasis from summative to formative assessment, from making judgments to creating descriptions that can be used in the service of the next stage of learning. [Teachers] craft assessment tasks that open a window on what students know and can do already and use the insights that come from the process to design the next steps in observation, worksheets, questioning in class, student-teacher conferences or whatever mechanism is likely to give them information that will be useful for their planning and teaching. Marking is not designed to make comparative judgments among the students but to highlight each students' strengths and weaknesses and provide them with feedback that will further their learning.

In reality, it is through classroom assessment that attitudes, skills, knowledge and thinking are fostered, nurtured

and accelerated or stifled (Hynes, 1991 cited in Okas, n.d.).

2.2.2 Assessment *of* Learning (AoL)

Assessment of Learning is the predominant kind of CA in schools. According to Okas (n.d.), the purpose of AoL is summative, intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about students' progress in school, usually by signaling students' relative position compared to other students. AoL in classrooms is typically done at the end of something (eg, a unit, course, a grade, a program) and takes the form of tests or exams that include questions drawn from the material studied during that time. Okas also claimed that AoL is a kind of assessment that still dominates most classroom assessment activities with teachers firmly in charge of both creating and marking the test. Thus, a strong emphasis is placed on comparing students, and feedback to students comes in the form of marks or grades with little direction or advice for improvement.

2.2.3 Assessment *as* Learning (AaL)

AaL emphasizes the role of the student, not only as a contributor to the assessment and learning process, but also as the critical connector between them. Students, as active, engaged, and critical assessors, can make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved. It occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand (Okas, n.d.). AaL is an approach where students are their own best assessors.

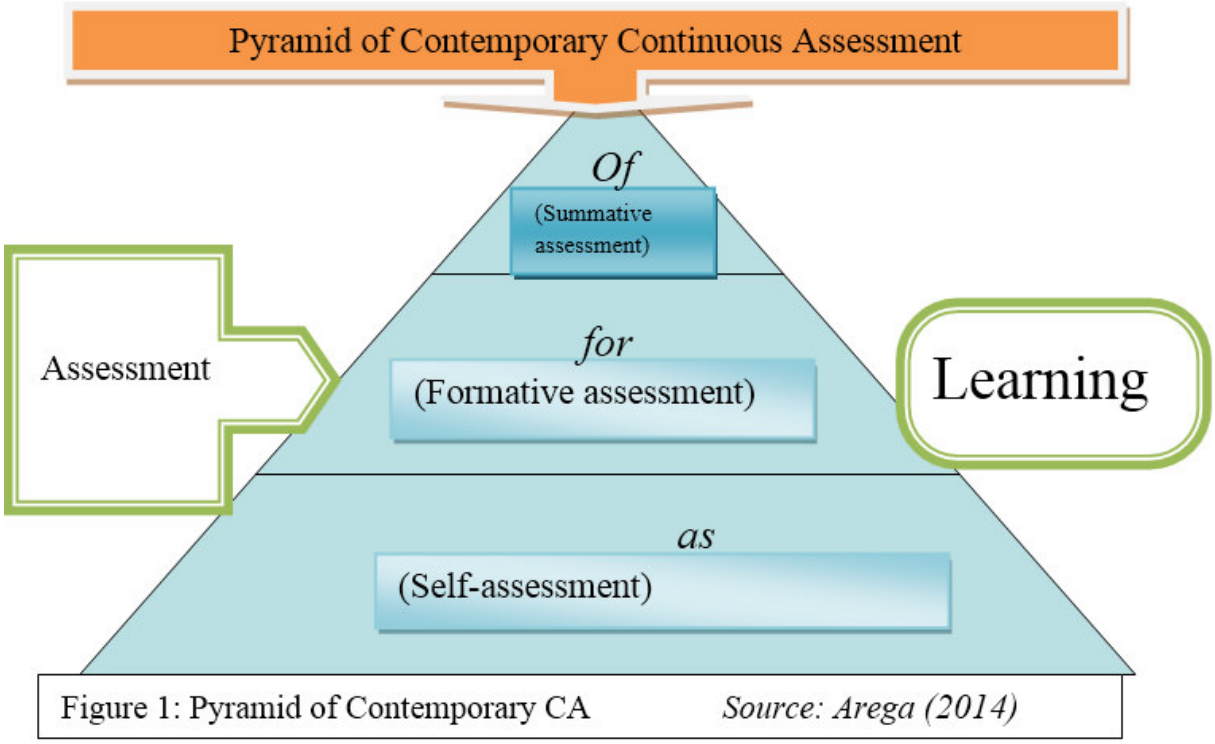

Figure 1: Pyramid of Contemporary CA *Source: Arega (2014)*

3. Method

For this study purpose descriptive survey method was employed. A sample of 72 teachers was selected from the total population of 191 primary school teachers through simple random sampling technique, specifically lottery system. Questionnaire was used as data collection instrument. In relation to questionnaire as data collection method, McMillan and Schumacher (2006:252) contend that "*for many good reasons the questionnaire is the most widely used technique… [and] is relatively economical, has the same questions for all subjects, can ensure anonymity and contains questions written for specific purposes.*"

Primarily the items were developed in English Language and translated to local language (Amharic) to maintain common understanding among subjects. The questionnaire was pilot-tested by collecting data from 20 teachers who were not included under the sample of the study. The data collected for pilot-study purpose Cronbach alpha and its reliability estimate coefficient was α=0.62. The items were four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, where, for positively stated items, 4 stands for "Strongly Agree", 3 for "Agree", 2 for "Disagree" and 1 for "Strongly Disagree". While scoring negatively stated items the numerical assignment to each category was reversed. The option called "Neutral" was excluded to avoid judgmental response of the participants. One-sample t-Test was used to analyze the data.

4. Results and Discussion

Table1: One-sample t-test result for the practice of CA in primary schools

Items	Mean	SD	SEM	Sig.(2-tailed)	Calculated t-value
I always assess students' prior knowledge before starting new lesson.	2.71	.846	.100	.040	2.088
I use CA only to give mark to students' learning performance.	3.17	.712	.084	.000	7.944
I always use CA during instruction to identify students' learning difficulties and interests.	2.96	.759	.089	.000	5.126
To monitor students' learning progress I record their performance in portfolio.	2.99	.741	.087	.000	5.566
After assessment I give prompt feedback to students comprising their strengths and weaknesses.	2.99	.682	.080	.000	6.052
I give assessment feedback only by marking students' achievement	2.81	.781	.092	.001	3.321
I always share the objectives and tools of CA before actual assessment process.	2.99	.722	.085	.000	5.715
I do not assess students' learning outcomes of the affective domain.	2.96	.879	.104	.000	4.424
I do not assess students' learning outcomes of the psychomotor domain.	3.01	.813	.096	.000	5.360
I continuously assess students' learning progress by using individual activities.	3.03	.712	.084	.000	6.294
I continuously assess students' learning progress by using group activities.	3.08	.622	.073	.000	7.953
I always support students with learning difficulties by using CA as a tool.	3.25	.666	.078	.000	9.554
In my school all teachers use the same pre-defined CA methods.	2.38	.830	.098	.205	1.278
I always assess students' learning by using paper-and –pencil tests.	3.07	.699	.082	.000	6.916
I give mark for attendance so as to decide whether a student is promoted or not.	2.74	.839	.099	.020	2.388
I give mark for students' exercise book so as to decide whether a student is promoted or not.	2.61	.848	.100	.270	1.111
I use self-assessment as CA method.	3.03	.530	.062	.000	8.450
I use peer-assessment as CA method.	2.81	.725	.085	.001	3.578
I use observation as CA method.	3.13	.529	.062	.000	10.024
I use CA results to compensate students who might fail in final exam.	2.93	.893	.105	.000	4.090
I always assess students' learning progress in every lesson.	2.93	.738	.087	.000	4.951
I always assess students' learning once a week.	2.88	.821	.097	.000	3.875
I always assess students' learning only once every two week.	3.19	.664	.078	.000	8.878
I always assess students' learning once in a month	3.26	.839	.099	000	7.725

As depicted in the table above, some of the primary school teachers always assessed students' prior knowledge before starting the next lesson (item1). This result found statistically significant at $p<0.05$($t=2.088$ & mean=2.71). In light of this result, Taylor (1999) contends that the purpose of CA is initial identification or screening of students' learning performance.

According to Ministry of Education(MoE, 2006), beyond purpose of grading or marking students' performance, continuous assessment should serve the purpose of monitoring learning progress of students, providing students with constructive feedback, identifying learning difficulties and examining effectiveness of teaching methodology. However, this study result revealed that primary school teachers used continuous assessment only to grade or mark students' learning performance (see item 2). This result is statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=7.944$ & mean=3.17). To the contrary, some other teachers have reported that they always used CA so as to identify students' learning difficulties and interests. This result found statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=7.944$ & mean=2.96, see item 3). Thus, based these results, it seems possible to infer

that the primary school teachers have been practicing CA in different manner for different purposes.

As portrayed in the above table, primary school teachers have asserted that they recorded students' performance in portfolio so as to monitor their learning progress($p<0.001$, $t= 5.566$ and mean=2.99, see item 4). Although some of the participants have reported that they give prompt feedback to students comprising their strengths and weaknesses ($t=6.052$, mean=2.99 & $p<0.001$, see item5) the result from some others, on the other hand, revealed that primary school teachers provided assessment feedback only by marking students achievement($t=3.321$, mean=2.81 & $p<0.001$, see item 6). These results foreshadow that feedback delivery system used by primary school teachers seem lack consistency. Consistent to this finding, Tefera (2014) found out that teachers were not giving sufficient feedback to students in teaching learning process.

Though some findings revealed that the primary school teachers always shared the objectives and tools of CA ($t=5.715$, mean=2.99 & $p<0.001$, see item7) they did not assess students' learning outcomes of affective domain ($t=4.424$, mean=2.96, $p<0.001$, see item 8) and psychomotor domain ($t=5.360$, mean=3.01, $p<0.001$, see item9). These results seem foreshadow that the primary school teachers fail to consider the three learning domain objectives of the courses. However, CA has the role of analyzing the level of knowledge, skill and ability of learners in different subjects (Institute of Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR), 1999)

As showed in the above table, the study results revealed that primary school teachers used individual activities (item10) and group activities (item11) to continuously assess students' learning progress. These results were found statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=6.294$ & 7.953, mean=3.03 & 3.08 respectively). Similarly, results also revealed that primary school teachers have used self-assessment (item17), peer-assessment (item18) and observation method (item 19) as CA tool to assess students' learning performance and progress. These findings found to be statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=8.450$, 3.578 & 10.024 and mean=3.03, 2.81, & 3.13 respectively). Based on these findings, one perhaps can infer that primary school teachers seem used variety methods of continuous assessment. In connection to this, Meherns and Lehman (1991) argue that the classroom CA must not be restricted to conventional paper-and –pencil achievement tests rather they must use variety of assessment techniques like rating scales, checklists, observation and so forth.

Moreover, Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE, 2006:144) asserted that " a teacher is expected to use continuous assessment to monitor the progress of students, understand the principles of continuous assessment and [identify] the varieties of techniques that can be used."

The participant primary school teachers also affirmed they always support students by identifying their learning difficulties through continuous assessment. This result found statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=9.554$, mean=3.25, see item12). However, teachers' did not use the same pre-defined CA methods ($t= -1.278$, mean= 2.38, $p>0.2$, see item13). Thus, it is possible to infer that there was disharmony among teachers in using assessment tools though they supported students by identifying their learning difficulties through CA. However, Tefera (2014) found that most teachers did not include a variety of CA tools in their plan and did not use in the classroom activities.

As depicted in the table, primary school teachers always assess students' learning outcome by using paper-and –pencil tests (see item 14). This result was statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t= 6.916$ & mean=3.07). Thus, this finding shows that, still, there are some teachers who use CA only for summative purpose (assessment of learning). Therefore, the role of CA as assessment for learning (formative purpose) seems ignored by some of primary school teachers. Consistent to this finding, Obioma(2010) cited in Awofala and Babajide (2013) investigated that many teachers misapplied the CA instruments leading to more continuous testing instead of continuous assessment. Aytaged (2010) further asserted that judgmental role of continuous assessment is more practiced than the development role of the assessment.

Research results showed that primary school teachers assign marks to classroom attendances to decide on the promotion of a student (see item15). This result found to be statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=2.388$, mean=2.74). On the other hand, even though the observed mean (2.61) seem numerically greater than the expected mean (2.5), the results assured that the primary school teachers did not assign a mark to students' exercise books ($t=1.111$, mean= 2.61, $p>0.2$, see item 16). On the other hand, findings of the study also revealed that teachers have used continuous assessment to compensate students who might fail in final exam (see item 20). This result found statistically significant at $p<0.001$($t=4.090$ & mean=2.93). Based on this result one can infer that the practice of continuous assessment is not yet free from doubts. In connection to this finding, tremendous researchers have documented the problems in the practice of CA. Accordingly, some of the problems found were that the entire practice of CA is surrounded by laxity (Birhanu, 2013), the assessment methods that instructors use are not effective in promoting good learning (Black & William, 2004 cited in Fisseha, 2010), teachers experienced difficulties in implementation of formative assessment(Israel, 2005 cited in Mpapalika, 2013), teachers are complaining that CA increases the workload for teachers(Mpapalika, 2013)

In this study the primary school teachers have reported varied frequency of assessment. As depicted in the table above, some teachers assessed students' learning outcome every lesson ($t=4.953$ & mean=2.93, see item 21) while some others assessed students' learning outcome once in a week ($t=3.875$ & mean=2.88, see item

22), once every two week (t=8.878 & mean=3.19, see item 23), and once in a month (t=7.725 & mean=3.26, see item 24). These results were found statistically significant at p<0.001. In contrast to these findings, Ministry of Education (2006) pinpointed that teachers are expected to regularly monitor, assess, and recs.ord the aptitude, abilities, needs and progresses of student. Similarly, Dawit et al. (2008) contend that in teaching-learning process it is indispensible or imperative to conduct periodic assessment of student learning vis-à-vis their attainment of the intended outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The primary school teachers have used CA to identify students' prior learning background at inception level. Assessment feedback system was not consistent and varies from teacher to teacher. Accordingly, some of the teachers have provided constructive assessment feedback comprising strengths and weaknesses of each student while others have used row mark as a feedback. The purpose continuous assessment has served varies from teacher to teacher. In this regard, some of primary school teachers have used CA to identify students' learning difficulties and learning interests(purpose assessment for learning) while others have used it to assign mark to students' learning achievement(purpose of assessment of learning). There are some primary school teachers who still use only paper-and-pencil tests as CA tool. These teachers seem considered continuous assessment as continuous testing. The primary school teachers have assessed objectives of cognitive domain, and totally left to assess the objectives of affective and psychomotor domain. Thus, there is discrepancy between the perceived purpose of continuous assessment and what the teachers have used for. To conclude, the practice of continuous assessment in primary schools lacks harmony and consistency. As recommendation, the government should develop harmonized continuous assessment policy or guideline if CA is to serve its purpose.

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