THE USE AND PRINCIPLES OF CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Educational assessment provides the necessary feedback required in order to maximize the outcomes of educational efforts. The assessment of learners’ learning provides objective evidence necessary in the decision-making process in education. As correctly pointed out by Cone and Foster (1991), good measurement resulting in accurate data is the foundation of sound decision making.

In 2004 near the end of the academic year, which is a time for revision and preparation for the end of the year examination, while I was revising with the learners and informing them on the number of papers and questions they would be writing, a pupil asked “Sir, why are we taught for a whole year and then given a two hour paper to determine whether or not we know the subject? Another asked, would a one shot examination adequately assess what we had learnt over a long period of schooling? How would you grade learner who happens to fall ill and could not write the final examination?
In attempt to answer those questions and many more, educational measurement experts and policy makers have come up with the concept of CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT.

**What is Continuous Assessment?**

Continuous Assessment is the periodic and systematic method of assessing and evaluating a person’s attributes. Information collected from continuous behaviour of students will help teachers to better understand their strengths and weaknesses in addition to providing a comprehensive picture of each student over a period of time. Such information will help in educational and vocational placement of students. Continuous Assessment will afford student to readily see his or her developmental pattern through the data.

Continuous Assessment of learners’ progress could also be defined as a mechanism whereby the final grading of learners in the cognitive; affective and psychomotor domains of learning systematically takes account of all their performances during a given period of schooling (Faleyalo, 1986). Assessment in the cognitive domain is associated with the process of knowledge and understanding. The effective domain applies to characteristics such as attitudes, motives, interests and other personality traits. Assessment in the psychomotor domain involves assessing the learners’ ability to use his or her hands (e.g in handwriting, construction and projects).

From these definitions, one could infer that Continuous Assessment is an assessment approach which involves the use of a variety of assessment instruments, assessing various components of learning, not only the thinking processes but including behaviors, personality traits and dexterity. Continuous Assessment will also take place over a long period of
time. Such an approach would be more holistic, representing the learner in his/her entirety. It will begin with the decisions that the teachers perform on the first day of school and end with the decisions that the teachers and administrations make on the learners regarding end-of-year grading and promotion.

Continuous Assessment will however, not be successful without the dutiful commitment, diligence and sacrifice on the part of teachers. The task is difficult and calls for dedicated objectivity and handwork on the part of the teachers, counselors and everybody involved in the education of the child.

**Origin of Continuous Assessment**

The present National Policy on Education observed that the existing practice (in most institutions of learning) of basing the assessment of students’ work on final examination and on one type only as no longer tenable. The policy further points out that the first school leaving certificate examination will ultimately be abolished and primary school learning certificate will be issued by the headmaster of individual schools and will be based on continuous overall guidance-oriented assessment of pupils and not on the results of a single final examination. Such assessment will be done by teachers and the headmasters.

The introduction of continuous assessment in the National Policy of Education dated back to 1969 curriculum development conference in a paper presented by National Education Research Council (NERC). The National Policy on Education (1981:8) stated that:
“Ultimately, there will be no formal examination at the end of the first six years of primary education, certificate will be based on continuous assessment”.

“At the end of the first three years following primary education, the junior secondary school certificates will be based on final examination and continuous assessment method. The certificate will be issued by the head of the institution-”

“At the end of the second three years course (Senior Secondary) a formal examination will be given but the performance during the three years will be weighted and taken into account for certificate purpose.

“The university and other institutions of higher learning will also be required to explore ways of introducing an element of continuous evaluation/assessment of their students.”

The National Policy of Education is advocating for the following in all institutions of learning with particular reference to 6-3-3- 4 OR 9-3-4 system of education.

1) Primary education = C.A
2) Junior Secondary Education = CA + Final Examination
3) Senior Secondary Education = CA + Final Examination
4) Higher Education

C.A + Final Examination

The continuous assessment in all constitutes 40% or 30% of the total marks (depending on educational level) except for primary education where C.A constitutes a total of hundred marks In some schools this 31% or 40% is divided into three grade assessment, others prefer two graded tests. Attendance, at time constitutes part of this grading in some schools. Teachers are “the alpha and omega (i.e have the final say when it comes to the mark or score of the students) of their subjects.

Characteristics of Continuous Assessment

The following are the characteristics of continuous assessment.

(a) Systematic
(b) Comprehensive
(c) Cumulative
(d) Guidance-Oriented

(a) **Systematic Nature of Continuous Assessment:**

Continuous assessment is said to be systematic in the sense that it requires an operational plan which indicates what measurement are to be made of the pupils’ performance, at what time intervals or times during the school year, the measurements are to be made and the results recorded, and the nature of the tools or instruments to be used in the measurements.
(b) **Comprehensive Nature of Continuous Assessment:** Continuous assessment is comprehensive in the sense that many types of instruments are used in determining the performance. Continuous assessment may come in form of tests, projects, assignments, observations, questionnaire and interviews.

(c) **Cumulative Nature of Continuous Assessment:** C.A. is cumulative since any decision to be made at any point in time on the pupil takes into account of all previous decisions about him. This requires the keeping of up-to-date or cumulative records of each pupils.

(d) **Guidance-Oriented Nature of Continuous Assessment:** C.A. is guidance-oriented because information is used to guide his placement, career prospects, vocational training and further development.

**Some of the Forms that Continuous Assessment Can Take**

Continuous assessment can be organized and implemented in a large number of different ways, and the actual assessment procedures can take many different forms. This include:

(a) Tests
   (i) Essay test
   (ii) Objective tests

(b) Project/Assignment Techniques

(c) Observation Techniques

(d) Sociometric Techniques

(e) Interviews

(f) Rating scale

(g) Class attendance etc

(h) Inventory etc.
How to Plan and Organize Continuous Assessment

Because of the wide variety of forms that continuous assessment can take, it is difficult to provide detailed guidelines on how to plan and organize such assessment. We can however, provide a number of general guidelines on how to do so, and it is hoped that readers find these helpful. The guidelines are again framed around those given by Bob Purvis in his CICED booklet on ‘Continuous Assessment’.

1. Ensure that the proposed assessment scheme, is progressive and properly integrated, and that the different assessment vehicles are appropriately matched to the objectives, learning outcomes of competence that they are intended to asses (student performance should prove useful here).

2. Remember that examinations and other ‘terminal assessment’ vehicle can be used together with continuous assessment programmes, so try to use both modes of assessment in the most effective and complementary way.

3. Always tell your students exactly what you expect them to do, and make sure that your requirements and ground rules’ are properly adhered to. Ensure that other members of staff involved in teaching the courses are also fully informed of your plans; their comments will generally be useful.

4. Ensure that any written instructions or guidelines provided to your students are clear, unambiguous and helpful.

5. Make sure that you create appropriate opportunities for students to discuss the continuous assessment programme with yourself and
any other members of staff involved, both before they embark on the programme and during the programme itself.

6. Do not set major assignments too early in a course, begin simple assignments and then make them progressively more demanding, so that students develop their competence and build up their confidence in a systematic way.

7. Make sure that students have sufficient time to prepare for and carry out each element of the continuous assessment programme, particularly if this involves fact-finding or research of some sort.

8. Make sure that your students are not over-assessed, either by yourself or by you and your colleagues. Too many assessments can be counter-productive, and can cause students unnecessary stress. Interdisciplinary assessments are possible, and reflect workplace practice.

9. Monitor standards carefully to ensure consistency between the marking of different students’ work, to ensure that standards are maintained from one year to another, and to demonstrate fitness for purpose. This is particularly important if several people are involved in the marking.

10. Allow sufficient time for adequate marking and commitment on the students’ work, but try to ensure that they receive feedback in a reasonable time; institutional and course regulations should be followed here.

11. Remember that full and constructive feedback is an essential feature of continuous assessment, particularly if it is being used for formative purposes. Make sure that you provide this; if you don’t, then an
external examiner or verifier will almost certainly sport its absence.

Rationale for Advocating Continuous Assessment

Some of the reasons for this advocacy of continuous assessment may be inferred from the policy statements, but there are other reasons not referred to in the national Policy on Education. The following appears important for continuous assessment.

(a) Assessment is an integral part of the teaching process. It is therefore reasonable that the teacher should be involved in the final assessment of pupils he or she has taught. The present system whereby the final assessment of the learner at the end of a particular level of education is done through a single examination set by an external body, tends to deny the teacher the opportunity to participate in the final assessment of his or her pupils.

(b) An assessment procedure which takes into account the learner’s performance throughout the entire period of schooling is likely to be valid and more indicative of the learner’s overall ability than a single examination.

(c) The readiness of teachers to introduce innovations into their teaching is often frustrated by the fact that a final external examination does not take account such innovation. In a continuous assessment situation, the teacher’s assessment of the performance of students on such innovations can become a part of part of the final assessment. The teacher would therefore be encouraged to be flexible and innovative.

(d) An important aspect of instruction is the appropriate guidance of the learner both in his or her learning and preparation for a career. A
A teacher also needs to assess his or her own instructional methods from time to time in order to improve his or her performance. Data from continuous assessment can be useful to the teacher for such self-assessment.

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 Examinations. It has been suggested that one reason for such a high incidence of examination malpractices is the fact that the single final examination is so crucial in deciding the future of the candidate 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.

Problems of Implementing Continuous Assessment in Schools.

Finance:

The major problems to the successful implementation of a continuous assessment is lack of funds. Money will be needed to buy textbooks that are relevant to the syllabus, stationeries, equipment and book shelves for record keeping. The absence of all these materials will pose a great danger to the successful implementation. Special budgetary allocation should be given to principals in order to purchase these necessary materials.
Adaptation to Change

Since the programme of continuous assessment is new the tendency is there for teachers to resist the idea behind the programme tactically because it is radical departure from the formal practice. As Kendall (1989) rightly asserted resistance to changes by individuals may arise:

(a) If it means he has more work without comparable reward and
(b) It if might take him into uncharted territory where his shortcomings might be expressed.

For these and many other reasons an individual will prefer to maintain a status quo that is not threatening rather than risk an innovation, which is not completely in their control but for which they might be blamed in the event of failure Therefore, since the programme of continuous assessment is an additional responsibility for teachers special incentive should be introduced so as to motivate them.

Training of Teachers

The haphazard way of implementing the programme in schools is as a result of lack of adequate training of teachers. Teachers saddled with the responsibilities of handling continuous assessment are either not trained or not properly trained. Due to the fact that teachers are the sole operators of continuous assessment in schools, it is imperative that they should be adequately trained. Training of teachers should commence in schools. Methods and practices of implementing continuous assessment should be incorporated in teacher training schools, Colleges of Education and Universities. Teachers should know how to use other methods of assessment apart from written tests for cognitive domain. Government should organize in-
service training, seminars and workshops on continuous assessment at regular intervals for teachers.

**Mode of Operation**

Due to lack of adequate training on the part of teachers, the implementation/administration of continuous assessment is carelessly handled. The motives and objectives behind the system are not even clear to most teachers and students alike. In order for the programme to enjoy credibility and continuous existence, it should not be haphazardly implemented. It is imperative that a committee be set up in each school that will manage the affairs of continuous assessment. This committee should be headed by the Assistant Head Teacher, while the school Guidance Counselling can serve as the secretary. All the teachers in school should also be co-opted.

The continuous assessment committee should be saddled with the following responsibilities according to Osokoya (1987)

(a) overseeing record keeping in school;

(b) guiding both the stale and new teachers on the technique continuous assessment;

(c) developing time-table for continuous assessment programme;

(d) ensuring availability of appropriate materials for continuo assessment;

(e) facilitating the development of evaluation instrument an ensuring the validity of instrument;

(f) liaising with similar committee of other schools to ensure uniformity of procedures;
(g) ensure the impartiality of teachers as much as possible.

In addition to the above recommendations, the continuous assessment committee should:

i. moderate questions and result!; of continuous assessment;

ii. ensure that all techniques of continuous assessment are utilized e.g. observational technique; interview technique socio-metric, projects etc;

iii. make continuous assessment records available for transfer purpose;

iv. organize make-up assessment ‘or students that are indispose during assessment

v. report to the appropriate authorities for disciplinary measures/action teachers who indulge in personal prejudice when assessing students

**Record Keeping**

The successful outcome of assessment depends on meticulous keeping of accurate records. Accurate reports should be kept for future usage. Teachers should be trained on how to fill and keep records. Assessment forms wherein teachers fill the records should be made available to teachers preferably week before the final examination.

**Favouritism**

It has been discovered that some teachers at times, unduly favour, some pupils while some pupils are victimized by teachers. These should be eradicated in all its ramifications. Pupils should be encouraged to report cases of undue favourism or harassment. Continuous assessment
committee should also entertain, investigate petitions and resolve any emanating issues accordingly.

**Overpopulation**

There are cases whereby pupils are overpopulated. In such a case, it will be practically difficult for teachers to conduct accurate assessment. As a result students population in each class should be streamlined to manageable size.

**Over concentration in Written test**

Some teachers are of the wrong view that continuous assessment is synonymous to continuous written test. As a result written test is used as the only method of assessment leading to over testing. Continuous assessment is meant for assessing cognitive, affective and psychomotor (trichotomy of learning). Written test is the best method that can used for assessing cognitive domain while observation technique, questionnaires etc are best for assessing non-cognitive domains.

**Uniformity**

There is also the problem of ensuring a uniform format of continuous assessment in all schools. Since all pupils from various schools will sit for the same final external examinations it is necessary that a uniform assessment he used in all schools specifically for the final year pupils in our primary institutions. A forum should, therefore, be organized whereby all continuous assessment committees from all schools will meet in order to deliberate and ratify a uniform assessment for students especially primary and post-primary final year students.
Transfer of Continuous Assessment

There is this problem of transferring Continuous assessment record from school without necessarily removing the entire records from the school. Continuous assessment records should be available for transferring pupils from one school to the other without causing havoc to the results of other pupils. This will give room for continuity of records.

REFERENCES


NCE by Correspondence Course Book. Part V volume 1, Zaria, Nigeria.
