

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Primary School Teachers' Knowledge, Attitude and Perceived Practice of Continuous Assessment

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Abstract

This study endeavored to investigate primary school teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and perceived practices of continuous assessment (CA). Ninety-five primary school teachers from three primary schools in West Gojjam, Ethiopia, were randomly selected for the study. Questionnaire, interviews and content analyses were used as instruments of data collection. The findings indicated that teachers had misconception about CA and considered continuous tests they gave to students as if they were continuous assessments. Thus, it was recommended that teachers be given on-job training about CA and its implementation.

Keywords: *Assessment, Continuous assessment, Summative tests, Formative assessment*

INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, continuous assessment (CA) in schools was introduced relatively very recently with the declaration of the new Ethiopian Educational and Training Policy /ETP/ (1994). The Policy proclaims the need for transition of the country's educational system to bring quality education. The Policy also states that there

is a need of building students' capacity in problem-solving, reflection, creativity and innovation. Thus, it was recommended that schools incorporate active learning methods and CA. In the development of students' capacity, innovativeness and creativity, active learning and CA function as integral parts of education; CA playing a supportive role to active learning.

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Assessment is inexorably conjoined with teaching-learning, helping gather data about teachers' teaching and students' learning (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004), students' interpretation of the knowledge attained from their educational experiences, and their improvement in subsequent learning (Hub and Freed, 2000). The data may also provide information about students' performance, and thus become a tool for teachers to become aware of students' weaknesses, gaps, or deficiencies and make decisions. Erwin (1991) expresses assessment as a process of defining, selecting, collecting, analyzing, interpreting and using information to increase students' learning and development.

There are heterogeneous types of assessment that serve as devices for educational decision making. The types of assessment are dichotomized assessment modes that incorporate informal and formal, internal and external, formative and summative, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced, low stake and high stake, as well as continuous and terminal assessments. As Kapambwe (2009) signified, all these modes apply to continuous assessment, though the weighting skews to informal, internal, formative, criterion-referenced, and low stakes types; all of which seem to strongly link with the view of 'assessment for learning' with the eschewal or relegation of the concept of 'assessment of learning'.

While Freiberg and Driscoll (1996) consider assessment as a strategy for measuring knowledge, behavior, performance or attitude, Jones (1996) regards it as a means that describes and classifies learner performance in tests, examinations, etc. CA is defined as a formative assessment that informs educators and learners about a learner's progress in learning. CA takes place

continuously to track the improvement or failure of learners, so that teachers can give support and guidance for them to improve. According to Puhl (1997:2), CA affirms "high-order creative and critical thinking and results in cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes" among students; and "reduces instructional drudgery and increases personal satisfaction" among teachers. It is described as a systematic and regular technique of determining learners' achievement from activities that involve cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (The Federal Government Handbook on Continuous Assessment [FGHCA], 1985). For Yoloye (1984), CA is a method of evaluating the progress and achievement of students involving the three H's (Head, Heart, and Hand) to make them whole persons. Similarly, Fodayajo (1979) considers it as a system of assessment for students' general performance; and Bajah (1984) regards it as a continuous updating of judgment about performance in relation to specific criteria. Ezewu and Okoye (1981) give it a comprehensive definition that it is a systematic and objective process of determining the extent of students' performances and changes in their behaviors. Puhl concedes that CA is conceptually similar with alternative assessment, and characterizes it as "ongoing, informal assessment and evaluation combined" (Puhl, 1997:2). CA rectifies mismatches between tests and classroom activities (Chapelle and Douglas, 1993).

To put it in a nutshell, CA is characterized as systematic, comprehensive, cumulative and guidance-oriented. It is systematic for its definitive program; comprehensive for its incorporation of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains; cumulative since decision is made through repeated measurements; and guidance-oriented because its results are used for further development of students (FGHCA, 1985).

It is the assessment of learners over a period of time doing different tasks formally through oral or written assignments, tests and examinations, projects, presentations, demonstration of skills, role-playing, and quizzes or informally through different means the teacher thinks applicable.

The main purposes of CA include provision of feedback to learners, diagnosis of blemish in the teaching-learning process, revelation to readiness for progression, a source of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learners, teachers and tutors, provision of performance indicators for learners, teachers and tutors, and guiding grading and classification. It also informs option, choice and selection; provides a basis for evaluating instruction materials and informs the mentoring, guidance and counseling services; and acts as a teaching and learning activity. Furthermore, it informs curriculum review and development professionals. CA assesses students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor developments and uses variety of instruments for these assessments (Kapambwe, 2009).

CA enables teachers to obtain a reliable picture of students' competencies vis-à-vis their learning objectives. CA is advantageous to find out what students know and can do and their progress, to promote learning for understanding, to improve teaching, to determine the type of remediation required and to identify the students who need mediation, and to contribute to the overall student evaluation (Plessis, 2003, in Boloyard, 2003). Coll et al (2007) also acknowledged that CA provides multiple evidences about students' knowledge and abilities. Thus, it assumes a strong relationship between teaching, learning and assessment. CA informs teachers about students' progress, and helps them to evaluate the effectiveness of their

teaching. In short, the change in the assessment process brings a change in instructional process; and CA plays a significant role in this regard.

One of the problems of CA is associated with teachers' record keeping. Teachers may have difficulty in keeping students' assessment records for a long period of time. Another problem may be the danger of over-assessment unless it is well-planned and coordinated; and this may affect student-teacher rapport. Students, on their side, may be wary of assessments for feeling under continual surveillance. Besides, they may suffer from lack of resources; and they may develop dependency syndrome while doing assessment tasks in groups. They may also feel that they are treated unequally as a result of inconsistent marking across teachers (Coll et al, 2007).

Research indicates that teachers do not implement CA at different levels of education for assorted reasons. For instance, Ugodulunwa (1996), in Zambia, identified some problems of implementing CA in primary schools that include an increase of teachers' workload, lack of standards among schools and lack of well-trained teachers. Obioma (n.d.) also showed that junior high school teachers demonstrated poor knowledge of CA, and the majority wrongly applied it as continuous testing instead of continuous assessment. The majority of university teachers in Nigeria were also found that they did not apply CA for evaluating students' affective and psychomotor domains (Juliet, 2009). Onuka and Owolabi (n.d) identified that the major challenges of implementing CA in Nigerian secondary schools were:

*students' poor preparation
for tests, poor test
administration procedures,*

poor handling of scores and feedback to students, poor coverage of instructional contents by test contents, large classes, inadequate time for tests and lack of knowledge and skills of the appropriate evaluation techniques (p.1).

Besides, Onuka and Owolabi noted that teachers also had care free attitudes.

In studies conducted at universities and colleges in Ethiopia, Tebeje (2009) reported that teachers did not apply CA for lack of knowledge, while Dagne (2009) said the majority did not apply it because they assumed it additional burden to their work. Meba (2008), in his part, found that teachers hardly practiced CA for reasons related to absence of assessment policy, students' low level of English that hinder them to perform varied continuous tasks, and the influence of previous experiences of testing.

To sum up, the decisive factor for the effective implementation of CA in schools is teachers' knowledge, skill and attitude to utilize it as part of their teaching. Both pre- and on-job teacher training about CA is desirable, but it seems that this part is lacking in Ethiopian schools. To evaluate the effectiveness of the employment of CA in schools, we were convinced that primary school teachers' knowledge, attitude and practice of CA in their classrooms need to be studied. Therefore, this thought provoked us to respond to the following research questions.

1. Do primary school teachers have the adequate knowledge of CA?
2. What does their attitude towards CA look like?
3. To what extent do they implement CA in their classrooms?

4. What methods do they employ in implementing CA?

Research methodology

Research site and participants of the study

The study was conducted in Absela, Kilimask and Hibret primary schools in West Gojjam, Ethiopia. These schools were randomly selected from the total 9 primary schools in Ankasha District. The researchers were interested to find out teachers' knowledge, attitude and practice of CA in areas which are farther away from the capital of the Amhara Region, Bahir Dar.

Out of the total 189 teachers (103 male and 86 female teachers), 95 (61 female and 34 male) were selected using simple random sampling technique. The participants of the study (N=95) were English language, Amharic, Social Studies, Civics and Ethical Studies, and Science teachers in the three schools. The teachers' qualifications vary from TTI certificate to 12+4. The majority (76.83%) was 10+3 graduates; while only 4.21% had 12+4 qualifications. 12.63% had completed 12+TTI courses, while 2.11% was qualified at 10+1, certificate, 12+2 and 12+3 levels each. These teachers taught different subjects from grades 1 to 8 which constitute both first (1-4) and second cycle (5-8) primary levels. Of the total participants, 24.21% had a teaching experience for more than 10 years, and the rest (75.79%) served between 3 and 9 years. 57 (60%) of them said they took training about CA; but the remaining 38 (40%) responded that they did not.

Instruments of the study

In order to investigate primary school teachers' knowledge, attitudes and perceived practices of CA, questionnaire, interview and content analyses were used as data gathering instruments. The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The

first part required personal information about the participants, while part two sought to gather information about participants' knowledge, attitude and practice of CA. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 36 close-ended and three open-ended items. Of the close-ended items, 11 were designed to get information about teachers' knowledge, 10 items about their attitudes, and the remaining 15 about their practices. The items had a five-point Likert rating scale that ranged from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' which were given scales from 5 to 1, respectively. The third part of the questionnaire wanted to gather information about teachers' assessment techniques and frequency of use of CA in which the participants were expected to reflect about their experiences. The final part was open-ended questions that required participants' reflection about the advantages and disadvantages of CA based on their practices. The participants were informed to provide more than one response if they think that the answers could be many. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and some procedures were followed to assure its validity and reliability. To assure its validity, the questionnaire was given to two educational psychologists working in Bahir Dar University from whom we got positive responses, except very few items for reconsideration. Then, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated for the reliability of the sub-scales based on preliminary investigations given to 25 primary school teachers at Sertse Dingil Primary School at Bahir Dar; and the results showed .87, .66 and .84 for knowledge, attitude and perceived practice, respectively.

The second instrument used was interview. Six (two from the three schools each) randomly selected teachers were interviewed about their record keeping and the types and purposes of tasks they give to

their students. They were also asked questions that may arise from their responses. The interviewers took notes of their responses. The interviews took place in their schools during their free periods, and were administered by the researchers themselves.

The third instrument was content analyses. Nine teachers' assignments and quizzes from English, Natural Science and Social Science subjects were collected as samples for analyses. The assignments and quizzes were collected from randomly selected teachers among those who responded to the questionnaire.

Analyses of data

The bio-information obtained from participants' responses of the questionnaire was reported in percentages, but a one-sample t-test was calculated using SPSS 16 to analyze the close-ended questionnaire results. The one sample t-test was used because we believed that a certain standard should be set to gauge the obtained means against it. Accordingly, the one sample t-test compared the observed mean and the population mean (standard/expected mean). In this study, the population means were pre-determined to be 33, 30 and 45 for knowledge, attitude and practice, respectively.

The results of the interview and the contents in assignments and quizzes given were analyzed qualitatively; that is, they were narrated and described. The open-ended questionnaire items responses were thematically grouped and analyzed using raw scores and percentages.

Ethical issue

Before the questionnaire was dispatched and the interview was conducted, efforts have been made to explain the purpose of

the study to the school principals and teachers. The school administrators have evaluated the items of the questionnaire and interview before they were implemented. Finally, after getting consent from both teachers and principals, the researchers employed the instruments.

Results of the study

Primary teachers' knowledge, attitudes and perceived practices of CA

A one sample t-test was administered using SPSS 16 to see whether or not primary school teachers' knowledge, attitudes and perceived practices were statistically significant. Table 1 summarizes the results.

Table 1. Primary school teachers' knowledge, attitudes and perceived practices of CA [N=95]

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (SD)</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Knowledge	38.9895	7.60948	7.672	94	.000
Attitudes	28.1368	4.24521	-3.901	94	.000
Perceived practices	30.6947	5.24521	-26.582	94	.000

The findings indicated that the means for primary school teachers' knowledge, attitudes and perceived practices were 38.99 (SD=7.61), 28.14 (SD=4.25), and 30.69 (SD=5.25), respectively. A one sample t-test was computed for further analyses of the significance level using the pre-determined value for each of the variables. Accordingly, the means of teachers' knowledge, attitudes and

perceived practices were compared against the expected means of 33, 30 and 45, respectively. The findings revealed that the mean of teachers' knowledge significantly differed from the expected mean in favor of the observed mean. The means of teachers' attitudes and perceived practices of CA, however, were significantly below the expected means 30 and 45.

Table 2. Primary school English language teachers' knowledge about the roles of CA in enhancing students behavioral changes [N=95]

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (SD)</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Social interaction skill	3.7368	1.04383	6.880	94	.000
Emotional changes	3.8105	.89079	8.869	94	.000
Physical development	3.8947	.81832	10.657	94	.000
Intellectual development	3.0842	1.12669	.728	94	.468

As can be seen in table 2, the mean of teachers' knowledge about the role of CA in enhancing students' social interaction skill was 3.74 (SD=1.04), while it was 3.81 (SD=.89) for bringing emotional changes. The means for the role of CA in augmenting students' physical and intellectual development were 3.89 (SD=.82) and 3.08 (SD=1.12), respectively.

The means of teachers' knowledge about the roles of CA in bringing social interaction skills, emotional changes and physical development showed that they significantly differed from the expected

mean 3 in favor of the observed mean. The role of CA in bringing intellectual development among students was not significantly different from the expected mean.

Findings from the open-ended questionnaire items

Two open-ended items that inquired participants about the advantages and disadvantages of CA were included in the questionnaire. The results of the participants' responses to the open-ended items showed the results summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Primary school teachers' responses about the advantages and disadvantages of CA in percent (N+95*)

Advantages	%*	Disadvantages	%*
Helps follow-up students' progress and give feedback	44 (46.32%)	Biased results	66 (69.47%)
Increases students' results	23 (24.21%)	Wastes time (time consuming)	51 (53.68%)
Brings students' behavioral changes	19 (20%)	Adds workload (It's tiresome)	45 (47.37%)
Helps evaluate students' achievements	10 (10.53%)	Inflates marks	31 (32.63%)
Brings students' intellectual & physical changes	7 (7.37%)	Develops dependency	24 (25.26%)
Enables teachers to support students	7 (7.37%)	Problem of record keeping	19 (20%)
Increases students' attendance	7 (7.37%)	Students' wrong perception	14 (14.74%)
		Never brings behavioral change	13 (13.68%)
		Affects annual plan	10 (10.53%)
		Discourages self-initiation	10 (10.53%)
		Difficult to apply in large classes	5 (5.26%)

**Total percentage exceeds 100 because participants gave two or more responses to questions*

As indicated in table 3, nearly half of (46.32%) the respondents reflected that CA assists teachers to follow up students' progress and to give feedback accordingly. 24.21% assumed that it helps students score better, while 20% said it helps students bring behavioral changes. Another 10.53% of the participants responded that CA helps them evaluate their students' achievements. 7.37% of the respondents thought that CA is helpful in bringing students' intellectual and physical changes, in enabling teachers to support them, and in initiating students for higher class attendance each.

In expressing its disadvantages, the participants said CA encourages teachers to offer students biased results (69.47%); it is time-consuming (53.68%) and tiresome (47.37%). It was also assumed that it inflates students' marks (32.63%) and develops dependency syndrome among them (25.26%). Others associated the problem with teachers' poor record keeping system and lack of experience (20%), and students' wrong perception towards CA (14.74%). 13.68% of the participants argued that CA never brings behavioral changes among students, 10.53% each said that it disturbs their annual plan and discourages students' self-initiation for learning. Finally, a small number (5.26%) of the participants had expressed the difficulty of applying it in large classes.

Interview results

The participants were asked if they had files to record their students' day-to-day progresses. Their responses revealed that they did not have special records for the students' day-to-day performances. The only thing available is the record list of students in which students' marks for each assignment could be registered. It was also unraveled that participants misconceived continuous assessment to be continuous testing. As one of the interviewees said "We are told to give serious of tests, and as

a result, we teachers give quizzes every week." This was noted when the participants were inquired to explain the purposes of CA. They usually explained the purposes of CA in relation to the number of tests and assignments they gave to their students. That is, they equated CA with continuous tests, assignments and quizzes. Their responses vividly showed that they were exclusively interested in reducing student attrition rate (detention) focusing on offering assignments periodically reducing the parts for students' preparation. This, they assumed, could give students opportunities to earn better marks. Besides the assignment, they said they gave class work and homework for the same purpose. They attributed their focus on this to the students' less commitment to learn and poor level of understanding. They expressed that students usually failed in mid-and final examinations, and the continuous assessment was assumed to partly alleviate this problem.

Teachers were also asked if they were in touch with students' parents to discuss the overall personality changes (social, emotional, interactional and intellectual changes) in their children. All the interviewees responded they were not, and attributed to large class size as a barrier. The interviewees were also asked whether or not they had discussions with school unit leaders, students' union, guards, and other school community members concerning students' behavior outside of the class. The interviewees divulged that this was entirely uncommon in the schools they have taught. Finally, they were enquired if they had endeavored to identify their students' talents. All respondents solidly rejoined that they did not make an effort to distinguish students' talents except following-up their academic performance and class participation. A female teacher expressed the difficulty of identifying students' talents as "in a class that contains

more than 70 students, it is difficult to identify the names of students and their talents." They argued that identification of students' talents required them to have skill or training in the area.

Content analyses: analyses of teacher-made assignments and quizzes

The analyses of the nine assignments and quizzes taken as samples indicated that participants gave students short assignments that were developed on the lessons covered. The items were entirely related to the contents in the textbooks; and they hardly required students to involve in activities beyond mere transfer of knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate primary school teachers' knowledge, attitude and perceived practices of CA. A one sample t-test and descriptions were employed to achieve this aim.

Teachers' knowledge about CA

The one sample t-test indicated that primary school teachers had a good knowledge of CA. As indicated in Table 1, the mean 38.99 was significantly above the expected mean 33. This was true probably because the majority (60%) had taken training about CA, and since it is already in the Educational and Training Policy, these teachers might also have familiarity with the government's Educational Policy. This result differs from Tebeje's (2009) findings which reported that university teachers had lack of knowledge of CA. Although the levels are different between Tebeje's study and this study, primary and post-secondary levels, it is important to state the disparity of teachers' awareness about CA since it informs about where we are. The difference between the results has occurred probably because of the training given to the primary

school teachers, while this was not true in higher education institutions.

The findings also revealed that the participants recognize that CA significantly plays the role of enhancing students' social interaction skills, bringing emotional changes and their physical development. Contrary to one might expect and the objectives of employing CA in Ethiopian schools (ETP, 1994), the participants disclosed that CA's contribution to students' intellectual development is less than it does for other skills. That is, the observed mean was not significantly different from the expected mean. This can be interpreted that teachers averagely employ CA for students' intellectual development. However, when this result is compared with CA's contribution to the development of social, physical and emotional changes, it is very infinitesimal. The assignments and quizzes teachers gave were not, however, in favor of teachers' claims. The analyses of the contents of the quizzes and assignments given to students showed that teachers entirely focused on students' intellectual development. The result is also different from the participants' responses to the open-ended items. There, they have disclosed that CA is helpful to enhance students' capacity by giving teachers the opportunity to follow-up, to increase students' marks and others related to their intellectual development. Only 7.37% substantiated that CA helps both for intellectual and physical development. Therefore, the results found in the open-ended items of the questionnaire, and teacher-made quizzes and assignments designated that teachers focused on students' intellectual development. Besides, the interview results have also depicted that teachers completely pursued towards their students' intellectual gain. This discrepancy in teachers' responses to the close-ended questionnaire items and the contents analyses, the open-

ended questionnaire items as well as the interview might be attributed to teachers' inner feelings of conformity to the trainings given to them about CA when they responded to the close-ended questionnaire items. Over 28% of the participants argued that CA never brings behavioral changes due to students' wrong perception, and this is a mere reflection of their practice. This proves teachers' tendency to conform to the socially desired thoughts while responding to the close-ended questionnaire items. Thus, taking the participants' practical responses into consideration, it may be possible to argue that the result does not comply with Plessis's (2003) view of CA's role in evaluating students' overall development. It also differs from Puhl's (1997) ideas because in this study CA hardly resulted in cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes when we observe the practical reflection of the activities teachers gave. It did not also go in line with Yoloeye's (1984) claim that CA makes a whole person.

Teachers' attitudes toward CA and their perceived practices

As the one-sample t-test has disclosed, primary school teachers in the studied schools had an unfavorable attitude towards CA. Positive attitudes are driving forces to action. However, this was not true in the case of this study. As shown in Table 1, the difference between the observed mean and the expected mean for teachers' attitudes was significant, the observed mean (28.14) being significantly lower than the expected mean 30. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the participants had unfavorable attitude towards CA. Some responses the participants gave to the open-ended questions can also imply that they disfavored CA. For them, CA opens the gate for teachers to be biased and offer inflated marks to students. It was also considered as time consuming and tiresome.

Similarly, the observed mean (30.69) was significantly lower than the expected mean (45) in teachers' perceived practices. This indicates that the participants were not employing CA as a component of their teaching. Teachers' actual practice of CA in the assignments and quizzes, their responses to the open-ended items as well as their responses to the interviews also reflected this reality. What was on the ground was complete deviation from what actually was expected in applying CA. The teachers were giving students continuous tests rather than continuous assessments with the intention of reducing student attrition as there is a strong demand of promoting students to next levels. In this case, it was difficult to characterize CA as systematic, comprehensive and cumulative activity (Chapelle and Douglas, 1993).

Methods of implementing CA

As indicated above, in reality, teachers gave continuous tests rather than continuous assessment. They assumed the tests given as assessments. Based on this finding, it may be possible to contend that the participants were not implementing CA, and the recurrent tests could not be regarded as methods of implementing CA.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings it may be possible to conclude that teachers had a misconception about CA, and their implementation was not in line with CA's principles and guidelines. Because of the misconception, they were giving continuous tests rather than continuous assessments to their students. In other words, teachers taught to test students, and did not, in the real sense, assess to improve their teaching and students' learning. Therefore, further on-job training about the purposes and the implementation of CA by professionals in the area should be in order.

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