



Research Article

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Practice of Continuous Assessment in Learning Business Studies in High Schools of Lubombo Region, Eswatini

Yinusa A. Faremi¹

S'lungile K. Thwala¹

Nosipho T. Maziya²

¹Department of Educational Foundations and Management,
University of Eswatini, Kwaluseni Campus, Eswatini

²Faculty of Education, University of Eswatini,
Kwaluseni Campus, Eswatini

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Abstract

Continuous assessment (CA) is designed to improve learners' performance in their area of specialization and improve the teaching-learning process. The present study aimed to examine how the learners perceive the practice of continuous assessment in learning business studies in high schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design. Twelve participants were purposefully selected for the study. Data were generated using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide and analysed using content analysis in which the responses of the participants were categorized into themes and sub-themes. The results disclosed that learners had a positive perception of CA practice, and learning was improved through CA. Some of the learners perceive that continuous assessment creates an extra workload and is not frequently administered in recording their performance for the teacher to understand the learners' strengths in business studies before the final examinations at the end of the academic year. Based on the findings, it was concluded that learners had positive perceptions of continuous assessment in the learning of business studies and sensed continuous assessment as an effective way to learn business studies. A recommendation was made for teachers to administer continuous assessment regularly before the end of year examination.

Keywords: continuous assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, evaluation

1. Introduction

Continuous assessment (CA) is a fundamental tool for effective learning in all learning situations and institutions. All instructors, lecturers, educators and teachers consider assessment as one standing method of knowing how learners are learning. According to Shukla (2019), Continuous assessment is the continuous and frequent analysis of learning performance. As there is a need for constantly assessing students, this method is considered more of a tool. In the high schools of Eswatini, continuous assessment is used to make important decisions about the learners. For example, the teachers can make decisions on learners' capability, placement in special schools, performance at academic year end, promotion to the next level, and what constitutes a failure. All these questions can be answered by way of continuous assessment using different methods such as tests, homework/assignments, mini-project, and group discussions/work.

Continuous assessment is a method of evaluation that serves the purpose of reducing dependence on a single year-end examination. It is known to enhance learning as it promotes consistent effort by learners, unlike a final exam that is conducted only once a year. Relying solely on a year-end examination may not provide a comprehensive understanding of how students are performing in business studies. Hence, the adoption of continuous assessment by most educational institutions worldwide. Before continuous assessment came into the spotlight, the world relied on one examination at the end of the academic year (Obi & Obineli, 2019). However, it was noticed that this was not enough, and a more suitable method of keeping track of learners' performance was needed; hence, a continuous assessment was adopted to evaluate the learners' progress or performance throughout a module. This method has become a mechanism in which learners' final grading in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of their performance during a particular period are evaluated. Learners as active bodies in the teaching-learning process are also keen to know how much knowledge or how much skill they possess in their learning, which makes assessment a more important factor in their learning.

Learners are interested to know how they are performing and CA gives them frequent feedback; however, learners may perceive the method of CA in the course of their learning and this call for an investigation into the different ways the learners perceive the practice of continuous assessment. This investigation examines how learners feel about CA and make different parties in the educational fraternity aware of overlapping gaps and loopholes. Learners are different and can be disappointed by assessments, especially where they are of a subjective nature (Hernandez, 2012). For example, during presentations where a teacher is not consistent when allocating the scores. Learners can feel demotivated when they think they outperformed yet their scores are not what they expected.

Many countries of the world have adopted CA in their educational system and CA is implemented based on educational policies (Siyum, 2016), and Eswatini is no exception

because the Swaziland Education and Training Policy of 2018, stipulates the greater need for the standardization of assessment to obviate arbitrary decision-making at various levels (Eswatini Government, 2018). It states that the curriculum shall be revised to reflect agreed skills and competencies. This revision of the curriculum includes the redesign of report cards to reflect the skills and competencies and other tools for communicating learning progress. The policy also highlights the assessment policy rationale assessment providing a link between curriculum development and pedagogy, all of which are milestones of educational assessment. The policy confirms assessment as having a purpose in judging mastery of essential skills and knowledge, diagnosing learners' performance, motivating both learners and teachers to work hard and awarding qualifications or grades for the achievement (TeachThought Staff, 2020).

An assessment framework is provided to improve the quality, relevance, accessibility and effectiveness of education. The assessment strategic framework is for short-term, medium-term and long-term. The short-term framework develops assessment syllabuses in the area where they are not available. This helps to review assessment syllabuses to align them with innovations. The medium-term assessment develops human capacity in the field of assessment and it also avails the opportunity to access other assessment systems. The long-term networks with other assessment systems internationally. It seems that in the context of Eswatini, continuous assessment is practised based on the Swaziland Education and Training Policy and little effort is exhausted to study learners to contribute to the overall implementation of CA, to promote a quality education system; thus the present study seeks to find out learners' views on CA. All of these sums up the need to investigate assessment as a way of ensuring quality learning among graduates in the context of Eswatini.

Business studies involve gaining knowledge and insights into business organizations, their operational environments, and essential functions like marketing, operations, and finance (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020). It is an educational course or subject designed to provide students with the knowledge, and skills in organising business enterprises and general office administration. Streamlining the assessment and reporting of business studies can simplify the process while allowing for the implementation of a continuous assessment cycle. This approach not only facilitates programme and system evaluations but also generates systematic trend data that can assist in achieving long-term objectives and accreditation requirements. Continuous assessment methods such as tests, homework/assignments, mini-projects, and group work are crucial in aiding learners' knowledge acquisition by allowing teachers to assess the rate at which students are mastering the major concepts of business studies (The Peregrine Team, 2022).

2. Statement of the Problem

The high failure rates in some high schools of Eswatini might be as a result of improper

implementation of continuous assessment for the students to acquire more knowledge in business studies. Also, the lack of adequate training of teachers on how to implement the practice of CA might be a major problem, because some teachers may not be conversant on how to apply CA effectively for excellent learning. However, the learners may view CA differently despite an effort to implement it in the classroom and this may play a significant role in their success to learn. It seems that the education system might not be of higher quality to produce individuals that would contribute to building a brighter future for the nation if CA is not effectively implemented. The Swaziland Education and training sector Policy provides for standardization of continuous assessment (Eswatini Government, 2018), to be practised on all learners in the classroom and it is observed that it does not provide for learner differences such as learning styles, and those with lower attainments, amongst other things. It is observed that there is a dearth of studies on how learners perceive the practice of CA in learning business studies, most of the studies carried out in the Southern African context are on the challenges faced by teachers in implementing CA.

2.1 Research Objectives

1. Determine how the learners perceive the practice of Continuous assessment in improving the learning of business studies in high schools.
2. Ascertain the necessity for administering Continuous assessment in business studies.
3. Investigate the effectiveness of continuous assessment practice in improving the learning of business studies in high schools.

2.2 Research Questions

The following question guided the study:

1. How do the learners perceive the practice of Continuous assessment in improving the learning of business studies in high schools?
2. Is there any necessity for administering the continuous assessment in business studies?
3. How effective is continuous assessment practice in enabling high school learners to improve their learning of business studies in high schools?

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study was based on the Constructivism learning theory. Constructivism learning theory was developed by Jean Piaget in 1936. There are three broad categories of constructivism theory; Cognitive constructivism by Jean Piaget, Social constructivism by Lev Vygotsky in 1978 and Radical constructivism by Ernst von Glaserfeld in 1974.

Cognitive constructivism states that knowledge is constructed by learners based on their existing cognitive structures, Social constructivism supports the notion that every child's cultural development appears twice; on the social level and individual level, and radical constructivism state that all knowledge is constructed rather than perceived through senses (McLeod, 2019).

Constructivism theory is adopted in the present study because it views learners as a constructor of knowledge (Padgett, 2020). Constructivism supports learning as a social activity. Padgett (2020) believed that there is largely collaboration and social interaction are fundamental for cognitive development. Padgett (2020) Posits that learners learn best when working collaboratively which emphasizes collaborative continuous assessment techniques by teachers allowing group work.

4. Review of Empirical Studies

Learners have different perceptions of continuous assessment in improving the learning of business studies. A study conducted by Mishra and Mallik (2014) to find out the learners' perceptions of continuous assessment, adopted a qualitative survey method with a sample of twenty schools selected randomly. Seven focus group discussions were completed with students in different schools. The size of the focus varied from eight to ten, with learners taking from forms 3 to 5. The findings showed that learners were happy with continuous assessment because it evaluates their competencies, which helped them to ascertain what they lacked in curricular subjects. The findings relate to the study in that learners do perceive continuous assessment in their learning and thus the need to study and ascertain their perceptions to improve and close gaps, with the overall purpose of improving learning.

In another study conducted in Abia State, Nigeria in 2017, which used the survey design carried out ex-post facto, with stratified proportionate random sampling; it was shown that learners strongly agreed with the practice of CA to boost their learning. It relates to the study in that continuous assessment is fundamental and its use and employment should be made in a way that enriches educational policy goals (Chukwuemeka, et al., 2017).

Mixed-method research was used to conduct research in Tanzania by Kyaruzi, et al. (2019) conducted research in Tanzania using a mixed method that involve the use of survey and focus group discussion with a sample of 2767 form 3 learners from 48 secondary schools. The findings from the survey using structured equation modelling and focus group discussion using content analyses indicated that the majority of students highly appreciated the assessment practices of their mathematics teachers.

A study conducted by Fozdar (2010) in India, to investigate learners' perception of the use of continuous assessment in the bachelor's degree Programme of Indira Gandhi National Open University, carried out a paper-based survey for data collection. Random sampling was used for 1000 learners and the result showed that most learners were in

favour of assignments and they also agreed that assignments helped them in enhancing learning for better performance in examinations. The gap is that the study was carried out for the bachelor's degree programme, whereas the present study investigated business studies learners' perceptions of the practice of continuous assessment in learning business studies in high schools of the Lubombo region in Eswatini. Another study conducted by Samson and Allida (2018) in Uganda, used descriptive design, which purposed to investigate the influence of continuous assessment on academic performance in primary schools. The study discovered that assessment reveals the learners' areas of weakness and strength in a particular subject and they are encouraged to work towards improving the weak area. Although the study was on primary school pupils, the present study seeks to study the perceptions of high school learners towards continuous assessment.

A study conducted in Ghana by Ababio and Dumba (2013), adopted a cross-sectional survey design that used proportional simple random sampling techniques. The researchers make use of Form 4 geography students and data collected using questionnaires. The study revealed that the geography students expressed their consensus on the benefits of continuous assessment which enhances their comprehension of various geography concepts, facilitates more efficient revision, and fosters a sense of self-assurance. Also, in a study conducted by Faremi and Faremi (2020) in one of the selected universities in Nigeria, the CA of undergraduates significantly predict the academic performance of students in the educational administration and planning in a semester course.

5. Methodology

This study followed the qualitative approach to research. Qualitative research is an inquiry process that helps in creating an in-depth understanding of problems in their natural settings. The study adopted the phenomenology research design to be used in this research. Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand and describe a phenomenon. The approach investigates the everyday experiences of human beings and how individuals view or perceive a phenomenon.

The study targeted high school learners of business studies in the Lubombo region of Eswatini. The study considered only high school learners of business studies from forms 4 and 5 in two high schools in the region. The study adopted purposive sampling to select a maximum of 6 participants from each school who participated in an in-depth interview, to make a total of 12 participants for the study. Purposive sampling is the process where the researcher uses their judgment to select a sample that is more relevant to the purposes of the research and the extent to which judgement can be relied on to arrive at the typical sample (Ary, et al., 2006).

6. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was adopted in the analysis of data obtained from individual interviews. When utilizing a thematic approach, requires the researchers to become acquainted with the data, create initial codes, recognize themes, define those themes, and document their analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researchers were able to transcribe, synthesise, organise, analyse and interpret the data. The themes that emerged were used to explain the learners' perceptions of the practice of continuous assessment in learning business studies in high schools of the Lubombo region in Eswatini.

Creswell (2014) stated that there is a need to check for the accuracy and credibility of findings in a qualitative study which is very important in this study. In order to establish credibility, the researchers engaged in comprehensive individual interviews, conducting in-depth conversations with each participant. Following this, the researchers checked on the analysed texts and transcripts to provide participants with an opportunity to verify the accuracy and authenticity of their reports.

7. Findings

This section focuses on the presentation of the study's findings from the participant's point of view and how they perceive the practice of continuous assessment aligned with the study's guiding questions; the findings are presented as follows.

7.1 Learners' perception of the practice of Continuous assessment in improving the learning of business studies in high schools

Some participants were of the view that they like to be assessed using continuous assessment in business studies. The exact quotes from the participants are as follows; the participants said:

"I like and enjoy being assessed because I learn by doing most of the time, if there is no assessment I don't think that I can learn effectively and I like to be assessed using tests, homework, group discussion and take-home test." (Participant 12)

"Continuous assessment is a good tool to help me stay focused all the time in my studies. The most appropriate assessments for me include tests, quizzes and oral presentations." (Participant 11)

"I believe that it is not possible to have effective learning without continuous assessment because I think I can lose focus without being engaged in activities that support learning. It would be like learning just for fun and not for individual development and I prefer a test that will give me a clear picture of how much I learn" (Participant 9)

"Classroom activities will enable me to know and understand what I am learning and apply it in a real life context, to show that I have learnt. I don't understand the mission of learning without continuous assessment, to me it does not exist and I like classroom assignments most of the time." (Participant 8)

"I feel like oral presentations, group discussions and tests work for me and if I am not assessed; it means no

learning for me. During debates and group discussions, I am given the opportunity to show and support my understanding and I tend to learn more.” (Participant 5)

“I like to be assessed using continuous assessment, especially presentations, quizzes and tests. The presentations help me to gain boldness in my learning and being able to challenge my colleagues by putting forward my views on a particular subject. The test and quiz help me gauge my understanding of how much I have learnt.” (Participant 1)

Some participants had a negative perception of being assessed through the practice of continuous assessment. Their exact statements are as follows;

“I can say I prefer one shot examination at year end because all the activities given to the learners during class sometimes give more workload to the learners. If the workload is too much, then learning will not be enjoyable and as a learner in which I can lose interest. At the end of the term, we will still be able to recall our lessons.” (Participant 10)

“I don’t think a continuous assessment is effective to record learners’ academic performance because not all learners will be able to give their attention on assignments and tests, especially group assignments where there is some individual talk more than others.”(Participant 4)

7.2 The necessity of administrating continuous assessment in high schools

Some of the participants felt that it is necessary for continuous assessment to be administered frequently and properly because it helps master content with the learners during instruction. The participants were of the view that continuous assessment is an important learning tool.

One participant said:

“If the continuous assessment is not frequently administered, learners could not be able to master what is learnt easily and I think learners cannot take their learning seriously. It also gives me more practice to understand what I learn and tested what I have learnt”. (Participant 6)

Another one concurred:

“ It is good for continuous assessment to be administered frequently because I learn easily when I am engaged in activities and I think I cannot do very well in my studies if the teacher cheats when giving activities and I gain much practice that helps me understand business studies much better”. (Participant 7)

Others noted:

“Continuous assessment is necessary and it should be frequent because it aids my practice and this helps in interpreting more information. The practice is enough because it gives more tactics to answer questions impeccably as it trains us in all spheres.” (Participant 11)

“It is bad that continuous assessment is not properly administered by the teacher because as a learner I cannot be in a position to do what I have learnt in class and it gives more practice on what is learnt and sees if I understand it.”(Participant 12)

“Learners need proper assessment so that the learners will pass. I don’t think I will pass if I’m not properly assessed. This is because more practice gives me more knowledge thus more practice makes me pass. These assessment helps us to learn.”(Participant 2)

7.3 Effectiveness of continuous assessment practice in improving the learning of

business studies in high schools

Most participants had a positive perception of continuous assessment practice in that it is more effective to learn using C.A. The participants' statements are as follows;

"It is improper for continuous assessment to be one shot single examination at year end because the learning will not be effective as it might not be enough practice as some terms are busy, e.g. ball games in the first and second term. So this calls for more continuous assessments to be conducted to get more practice."(Participant 8)

Another participant who concurred with the notion of the Effectiveness of continuous assessment practice in improving learning had this to say:

"All learners need the practice to learn effectively because if not they will fail; which demolishes the traditional method of one shot examination at year end. More practice during learning helps to see if a learner will pass or fail."(Participant 2)

That was confirmed by other participants who remarked:

"If the continuous assessment is just one exam at year end, the learners will not see the weak side of the subject, and thus cannot correct mistakes just in time to correct them. Continuous assessment is effective in recording learners' performance as it helps the teacher to understand his or her learners' strong and weak sides." (Participant 3)

"One single examination at year end does not help learners to learn effectively because you need to prepare yourself for the examination in order to score the best quality marks, which can be achieved by having many continuous assessments. Continuous assessment is effective to record learners' performance as it is a guide to see if learners are improving in the subject, if not then encourage them to improve." (Participant 9)

8. Discussion of Findings

Participants indicated their perception of the practice of continuous assessment towards the learning of business studies including interest in being assessed, the necessity of administrating continuous assessment as well as an effective way to learn.

The findings of the study revealed that learners had a positive perception of continuous assessment as they liked to be assessed using assessment tools such as tests, quizzes, oral presentations, and assignments. The study corroborated Mishra and Mallik (2014) who concluded that learners were happy with continuous assessment because it evaluates their competencies, which helped them to ascertain what they lacked in curricular subjects. In the same vein, Kyaruzi et al. (2019) revealed that most learners valued their mathematics teachers' assessment practices. This study also conformed with the findings of Fozdar (2010) who discovered that most learners were in favour of assignments, and they also agreed that assignments helped them in enhancing learning for better performance in examinations.

The findings of the study also showed that learners deemed the administration of continuous assessment as necessary for them to learn. The results of the study concur with the findings of Samson and Allida (2018) who discovered that assessment helped

learners reveal their areas of weakness and strength in a particular subject and encouraged them to work towards the improvement of the weak area. The results of this study revealed that learners consider continuous assessment as an effective way to learn everything that they are supposed to learn. The study results conform to the findings of Ababio and Dumba (2013) who discovered that continuous assessment helped students to understand difficult areas in geography. Also emphasized that students reach a consensus that continuous assessment enhances their engagement during the learning process and also made them master the content of geography.

The study showed that there is also a negative perception of learners towards continuous assessment as all the participants were not positive about CA. The workload was pointed out as a burden by the learners in the practice of continuous assessment, which is not the case, but CA is present to help learners perform better (Samson & Allida, 2018). These results are in line with the findings of Al Kadri, et al. (2009) who revealed that students remarked that summative assessment provokes anxiety because of workload, and stress required an individual to think deeply before answering questions affecting the students' perceptions of learning and how they learn. However, the study finding is contrary to the findings of Rezigalla, et al. (2017) who discovered that continuous assessment does not pose an extra load on students because it consisted of different tools of assessments.

9. Conclusion

From the findings of the study, it was concluded that learners had positive perceptions of continuous assessment in the learning of business studies. This was because they indicated that they liked to be assessed through the practice of continuous assessment. They saw the necessity of administering continuous assessment in their learning and sensed continuous assessment as an effective way to learn. However, some learners viewed CA as not being an effective tool to manage their progress, but as an extra workload on them.

10. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations were proposed to enhance the use of continuous assessment in the learning of business studies. These are:

- The teachers should ensure that CA should be administered frequently before the end of the year examination and properly administered by the teacher.
- Teachers should communicate about the administration of tests and involve the learners at all times, keeping to assessment timetables so that learners can work hard to prepare ahead of the date.
- The practice of CA must be continuous using different techniques such as tests, homework, assignment, quizzes, mini-projects, and group discussions/work that

will yield positive results and able to differentiate the upper group from the lower group of learners.

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