Full Length Research Paper

A comparative study on the practice of continuous assessment between Addis Ababa and Unity Universities

Aytaged Sisay Zeleke

Institute of Educational Research, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

This paper aims to explore the practice of continuous assessment at Unity University College and Addis Ababa University. It has also investigated constraints instructors say they have been facing in implementing continuous assessment. Students' attitudes about the practice of this assessment mode towards their course achievements were explored. Course materials, continuous assessment modalities, randomly selected final examination papers, interviews and questionnaires were used as sources of data collection instruments. The purpose and focus of the assessment, the construct tested, the formats employed, critical thinking and creativity encouraged, feedback offered and received, record keeping of the assessment data and assessment of progress development, classroom management, stakeholders' involvement and the wash back effect of the practice of the assessment were identified to be the grand factors that cast a cloud over the practice of continuous assessment in the context under focus. It was also found out that both the testees and the testers over value the judgmental role of continuous assessment at the expense of its developmental role. What is more, maximized strengths and improved weaknesses after having results of each continuous assessment result device were found to be unfairly reflected in the students' course achievement profile. It was therefore tentatively concluded that the major cause that affected the implementation of continuous assessment in the context under focus was boiled down to the hangover of traditional assessment practices. Based on the findings, implications, insights and areas for further study were forwarded.

Key words: continuous assessment, feedback, test

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning are highly interwoven processes in which their effectiveness depends on one another. Assessment informs how well the students learn and how well the instructor is teaching. Some of the major purposes of assessment include assessing students' learning, identifying students' strengths and weaknesses, assessing the effectiveness of a particular strategy, assessing and improving the effectiveness of curriculum programs, assessing and improving teaching effectiveness, providing data that assist decision making and

communicating with and involving stakeholders. According to Kellough et al. (1999: 419), learning is effective when learners have answers to the following questions: "Where am I going? Where am I now? How do I get to where I am going? How will I know when I get there? Am I on the right track for getting there? These questions are integral to a good program of assessment.

Major changes in the area of assessment of learning, students' progress and achievement have taken place worldwide. Consequently, the assessment policy of

E-mail: aytagedz@yahoo.com.

Ethiopian higher education institutions has been reformed to respond to this global development. This is clearly spelt out in the Education and Training Policy of the country. The policy stipulates that continuous assessment should be employed to ascertain the formation of all rounded profile of students at all levels (TGA, 1994). The main purposes of using this mode of assessment are to develop students' abilities over time and to judge their performance based on the data obtained from the continuous assessment and final examination.

Observations and experience, however, seem to inform us that there are problems associated with the implementation of continuous assessment. Unlike the educational policy and strong advocacy about the importance of this mode of assessment by institutional leaders, some instructors are observed complaining about practical issues related to this assessment mode. Large class size, heavy teaching load in terms of teaching more than 3 courses per semester, and having **other responsibilities** in addition to teaching and research are some of the factors for instructors' resistance to effectively and efficiently implement continuous assessment. There also seems to be **a knowledge gap to clearly** understand how continuous assessment is benefiting the teaching learning process in contexts where the majority of the instructors are mainly subject **specialists** with no or very little training on pedagogy.

Objective of the study

The quality of assessment practices can be inferred from various angles. Among others, the basic qualities an assessment instrument should have are validity, reliability and practicality. There are different factors that affect these qualities. To this end, identifying some of the basic features of continuous assessment from related literature (NIED, 1999), Jaydu (2003) and WCED (1996), this paper attempts to compare the assessment practices in Ethiopian higher education by taking two higher education institutions as cases. It specifically addresses the following question:

How is the practice of continuous assessment in terms of purposes, focuses, feedback given and received, formats used, records of the progress development, stakeholders involvement, bench markings and system support compared at Addis Ababa University and Unity University?

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITRATURE

Below is a brief discussion on major issues about continuous, formative and summative assessments. Following this is a discussion on assessment bench marking, administrative support to students' assessment and what policy makers and managers could do with regard to assessment practices.

Continuous, formative and summative assessment

What is continuous assessment?

Defining continuous assessment, Falayajo (1986) capitalized on systematic assessment on the progress students exhibit on cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains over a given period of a teaching and learning process. Assessment on the cognitive domain deals with identifying students' level of knowledge and understanding an area of teaching and learning while assessment on the affective domain tries to capture students' attitudes, motives, interests, and other personality traits.

Airasian's (1991) definition stressed that teachers who use continuous assessment should use varity of data collection instruments and methods which in turn help them to interpret and synthesis information about the learners. Moreover, the information collected from the continuous assessment helps to plan and monitor the different components of the teaching and the learning processes.

Formative assessment

One of the major class room assessment purposes is to be formative. To achieve this purpose, an ongoing assessment which is also an integral part of an instructional process should be conducted. Formative assessment, thus, provides valuable information about students' learning by indicating some aspects of the teaching and learning processes that need to be strengthened, changed or modified.

Formative assessment uses a variety of assessment formats. The appropriateness of a format depends on the nature of the tasks to be performed. Some of these formats include checklists, portfolio, projects, individual and group presentations, short tests and quizzes. Students' involvement towards their learning in the form of self and peer assessments is also the other important feature of formative assessment. This, in other words, means that students are both assessors and resources to their friend's academic work. This is also believed to increase students' motivation to learn. Teachers' role is also important "in identifying learning goals, setting clear criterion for success and designing assessment tasks that provide evidence of students' learning" (Garrison and Ehringhaus, 2007). The same authors have also pointed out that students' involvement in the assessment of their own learning helps them to procure descriptive feedback as the teaching and learning process goes on.

Changing the mode of teaching from teacher to student centered facilitates students' learning. One of the ways to change this focus is to employ formative assessment. Many academics, however, agree that formative

assessment is challenging. Yorke (2005) suggested that actions can be taken from three broad levels to ameliorate the teaching and learning process through formative assessment. Actions can be taken at the level of an institution, academic department and individual tutor or small group of tutors.

Vision, strategy and leadership which promote the mode of assessment in focus are required at the level of an institution. Policy and practice should also be monitored to ascertain that they go hand in hand. Similarly, academic departments could develop their curricula which integrate formative assessment. In doing so, consulting the appropriate theory and empirical study is paramount to effectively facilitate students' learning. The academics could help students develop the necessary skills that help them to be autonomous learners. Yorke (2006) quoting Boud (1995) underlined that "formative assessment has a powerful part to play in reducing students' dependence"

Summative assessment

According to Brown and Knight (1994), summative assessment "… produces a measure which sums up someone's achievement and which has no other real use except as a description of what has been achieved''. This summative description, however, could be used to evaluate "the effectiveness of programs, school improvement goals, alignment of curriculum, or student placement in specific programs" (Garrison and Ehringhaus, 2007). Summative assessments which are conducted at a particular point in time, usually at the end of a course, or a program, are far away to provide information that can be used during the teaching and learning process. The following list presents instances of summative assessments:

1. State assessments
2. District benchmark or interim assessments
3. End of unit or chapter tests
4. End of term or semester exams
5. Scores that are used for accountability for schools and students (ibid)

Describing summative assessment by analogy, Black (1998) in Swearingen (2002) said "when the cook tastes the soup, that is, formative assessment, when the customer tastes the soup that is summative assessment". Thus, one could safely say that the focus of summative assessment is to judge achievement after completing a certain program while that of formative assessment is to develop students' learning.

Assessment of bench marks

Grades to students' performance could be awarded using

different bench marks. Three of these include norm referenced and criterion referenced. All of them distinctively differ in their ways to process assessment data and judge level of achievement.

Norm referenced assessment

The major purpose of using norm referenced assessment is to pass decisions about students' achievements by determining individual performance in comparison to others. Complementing this purpose, Bond (1996) quoting Stigens (1994) says that norm referenced assessment is used "to produce a dependable rank order of students across a continuum of achievement from high achievers to low achievers". He also went on saying that such classification of students into their level of achievements can help to place them either into a remedial or gifted program. On the other hand, Dunn et al. (2002) contended that norm referenced assessment "says very little about the nature or quality of teaching and learning, or the learning outcomes of students".

Test contents in norm referenced assessment are mainly selected based on how each test item properly discriminates students' level of achievement. To this end, item analysis is used to determine the difficulty level and discrimination power of each test item. In norm referenced assessment, some students perform very well, most have average performance and a few perform poorly.

A possible question that may go from here could be 'how very well is very well'. For instance, a student who scored 95 % in one academic year may not necessarily score an 'A' grade in the other semester for the quota of 'A' may vary depending on the achievements of the students in each year.

Criterion referenced assessment

The aim of criterion referenced assessment is to identify what each student knows, understands and can do in light of a well defined criterion (Bond, 1996). It, however, does not focus on comparing students on their achievements. Elaborating the purpose of criterion referenced assessment, Bond (1996) stated that it reports" how well students are doing relative to a pre determined performance level on a specified set of educational goals or outcomes included in the school, district, or state curriculum". Since individual performance is compared to some set standards or criterion, competition among students is not emphasized. One of the criticisms of this assessment as pointed out by Rowntree (1987) cited in Dunn et al. (2002:3) is that if students do not compete "academic rigor will be lost".

Unlike norm referenced assessment whose test contents are selected based on how well they discriminate

students, test contents in criterion referenced assessment are selected on the importance they have in the curriculum. How well do the test contents match the outcome of the teaching and the learning process is an important question that should be pondered over (Bond, 1996). It was also pointed out that since there should be a high degree of agreement between the assessment content and the learning content, which is taken to be very important in the curriculum, the data to be procured from criterion referenced assessment provides valuable indicators about the degree in which the valued contents have been studied than what the norm referenced assessment may provide.

The information gathered from criterion referenced assessment could be used by educators and policy makers to determine the level in which students have learned the curriculum and to see how good the institution has taught the curriculum. Dunn et al. (2002) consider this assessment as a fair and "more accountable assessment regime than norm referencing".

These days, there seems to be a growing interest and attempt to use criterion than norm referencing assessment in most higher education institutions. However, there is a challenging need that all stakeholders need to negotiate and arrive at a certain kind of consensus about the criterion and standards to be used. Dunn et al. (2002) referring to Carlson et al. (2000), Price and Rust (1999) and O'Donovan et al. (2000) as instances indicated that the major emphasis of the body of literature that deals with criterion referenced assessment includes:

1. the critical necessity of shared understandings about criterion and standards between all stakeholders in the assessment process;
2. issues of fussiness in the expression of criterion associated with high and low inference assessment tasks;
3. the inherent subjectivity of interpreting criterion and
4. concerns of academics staff about the implications of grades being skewed noticeably from a normal distribution.

Some important factors that policy makers have to ponder over before they decide choosing to use either criterion or norm referenced assessment according to Bond (1996) include: "whether the assessment strategies of a particular test match the tests of the educational goals, address the content the state wishes to assess and allow the kinds of interpretations state education officials wish to make about students' performance|".

Administrative support to students' assessment

One way to enhance the quality of students' assessment is to institutionalize a support system for it. One of the reasons for this is breadth (Brown and Knight, 1994).

They argue that if assessment is entirely left for an individual tutor, there could be a risk for the quality of students' learning to be broad. In addition, there could be a tendency for students' learning to be arbitrary. If teachers think that their teaching is a key factor to students' learning and pay no attention towards what the impact of assessment may have on the actual curriculum, they may unconsciously gear their assessment practices towards the simplest form or traditional mode. The other need to have such a system is accountability. "A university, as a whole, is accountable for what happens with in it. A system of assessment makes it possible to explain what students do and gain through their under-graduates' experience" (Brown and Knight, 1994). It is also contended that this system might make academics to take students' learning and assessment seriously which, in turn, helps to share ideas and good practices among colleagues within and across departments.

Establishing assessment offices in universities is decried by some as being unnecessary bureaucracy and as a thing which takes important resources away from teaching. Unlike this criticism, American universities, for example, appear to have such offices (Brown and Knight, 1994). "Vision, an understanding of the academic world, a functional knowledge of measurement and of research design, technical know how, understanding of the social science concepts relevant to measurement, teaching and learning, good communication skills, and academic credibility" are some of the areas assessment officers need to have (Astin, 1991 in Brown and Knight, 1994).

This central assessment office, then, is expected to support departments. Of course, each department has its own assessment practices within an institutional ethos. Values identified centrally should be tailored so as to fit the reality of each department in an institution. The advantage of having departmental approach to assessment is that it helps academics to negotiate meanings of goals set and to be clear of their colleagues' understanding.

What could policy makers and managers do to improve students' learning assessment?

Knight (1995) has identified four major areas that policy makers and managers need to consider to improve students' learning assessment. These are changing assessment to amplify the want to learn, changing assessment to help people to learn by doing, changing assessment to help people to benefit from feedback, and changing assessment to help people to digest what they learn.

With regard to changing assessment to amplify the want to learn, policy makers should think of giving a room where by students are allowed to develop and be assessed on areas that interest them and which are relevant to their future employment. These areas may not

necessarily be part of the curriculum. Giving options for students to choose formats to be used when they are assessed, not using norm referencing assessment, keeping students' learning as the objective of assessment are some of the points policy makers could think about to amplify the want to learn. Similarly, managers could "look for a range of assessments, for feedback systems, and students' evaluation of quality of the feedback they receive [and] coordinate assessment in a modular framework" (Knight, 1995).

Policy makers and managers could also change assessment to help people to learn by doing. The first example could be to think of making exams optional. The second could focus on having practical and real assessment. If managers give opportunity to staff to attend a workshop about assessment, these staff should share what they gained to others so that the process of staff development is reinforced.

Assessment could also be made to help people benefit from feedback. Policy makers could divert their attention from using degree scores, and final grades as performance indicators and they can "make competence in assessment a requirement for entry into higher education teaching….[and] attendance at in service professional development workshops on assessment a requirement for pay increments" (Knight, 1995). In the same manner, managers may encourage the use of both self and peer feedback together with on the spot feedback to practical sessions. Making sure that assessment criterion is communicated to students before students are assessed, ensuring that all assessment grades are collected throughout every semester and the data can be accessed by students' personal tutors and academic counselors so that academic counseling can be enhanced are also other areas that could be considered.

With regard to helping people to digest what they learn, policy makers may not need to emphasize on accelerated degree programs. They could however advocate on the use of portfolio and records of achievement. Similarly, managers should encourage the use of assessments that focus on problem solving and application of skills. If self and peer feedback are expected to be used, managers should think of organizing sessions that develop skills of offering self and peer feedback. Besides, staff should be given adequate time to give feedback and to go through it with students.

METHODOLOGY

Setting and sampling

The study is conducted in two higher education institutions in Ethiopia. These are Addis Ababa University which is the largest and the first government university in Ethiopia while the other is Unity University which is the first private university in the country. Convenience sampling is used mainly because the researcher has worked in both of the institutions which made data collection easy. It could also be claimed that the selection of the setting is purposive

because the researcher selected two institutions that could provide data from two types of owners of higher education institutions in Ethiopia, that is, government and private higher education institutions. More important to use purposive sampling in this study is that not only both institutions strongly advocate the use of continuous assessment but also integrate it with their teaching and learning processes.

Population and sampling

The population of the study is drawn from both instructors and students in these universities. A total of 20 instructors were taken from both institutions. First the available departments in both institutions were listed down. Then, five departments from each university were selected randomly. Names of members of the departmens were collected from the secretaries of the five departments of each institution and two members were identified from the list randomly for interviews. One student who was drawn from every department considered in this study was again included as an interviewee of the study.

Comparative research design

Based on Hantrais and Mangen (1996)'s argument, a study will be comparative if one or more units in one or two societies, cultures, countries or institutions are compared in respect of the same concepts and concerning the same systematic analysis of phenomena, usually with the intention of explaining them and generalizing from them. Thus, in this study, data were collected on the practice of continuous assessment from two universities in Ethiopia. The data collected used the basic features of continuous assessment. These features are purposes, focuses, feedback given and received, formats used, and records of the progress development, bench markings, and stakeholders' involvement and system support. These features are used as units to compare the practice of continuous assessment at Addis Ababa University and Unity University.

Data collection instruments

As a qualitative study, the major data collection instrument used was an indepth interview with instructors and students. An interview guide on the units identified to compare the continuous assessment practices in the two institutions was developed and used. The interview guide used has helped the author me to focus on the discussion, make use of the limited amount of time for the interviews, and systematically address issues relevant to the study. Even though the guide predetermined the author's focus, it did not do so whenever he wanted to probe and explore issues under this predetermined inquiry area and when interviewees raised related issues.

The study participants were asked for their willingness to be interviewed and the interviews were conducted on the pre- agreed schedule. The time taken in the interviews ranged from 1 h to 1:30 min and all of them were conducted in quiet places. Caution has been taken to give much of the talking time to the interviewees and not to bias their responses by the interviewer's body gesture and facial expressions and by not providing leading questions while the interviews were under play. Whenever some thoughts were not completely presented, seemed to be ambiguous and needed further discussion, the author asked for clarification, additional information, follow up questions and did also some probing.

The other data collection instruments were continuous assessment modalities, and mid and final exams from which inferences were made about the issues under question. In addition to this, a

review of related literature was used.

Data analysis and quality assurance

Bryman (2004), in discussing how the quality of qualitative data collection instruments like interview should be assessed, pointed out trustworthiness as an important criterion which is "made up of ….credibility, and conformability" among others.

With regard to credibility which aims at assuring whether or not the interviews data confirm what actually the interviewees reported, the participants were asked to comment on the interview transcriptions. Even though some seemed to be reluctant to act to this process, others have collaborated very well by editing, modifying and even by elaborating their view points

To maximize conformability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest to control as much as possible the researcher's personal values, perspectives and positions regarding the issues under investigation. Since the author has a clear stake not only as a researcher but also as a staff of the institutions, zeroing his feelings, understandings and positions about some issues was a little bit challenging. As Bryman (2004) puts it, even though" complete objectivity is impossible in social research", the author should consciously attempt not to overtly reveal any inclination towards a given perspective, attitude and position.

The data obtained from interviews were analyzed qualitatively in which the emerging issues regarding the features of continuous assessment which were considered as major units of comparisons were thematically treated using open coding (Ibid). The interview results were triangulated with the assessment modalities used, the mid and final exams administered in the two institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As it has been pointed out above the question raised in this study was how is the practice of continuous assessment compared to in terms of purposes, focuses, feedback given and received, formats used, and records of the progress development, bench markings, and stakeholders' involvement and system support at Addis Ababa University and Unity University.

This section presents the qualitative data that attempted to respond to the aforementioned question together with discussing the results.

Purpose: One could say that both formative and summative assessments are in place both at Addis Ababa University and Unity University. Of course, there is a clearly stated institutional assessment policy at Unity University which states that 50% of the assessment should be formative while the rest should be summative. Even thought, it does not seem that there is such a clear assessment policy guideline that governs every academic department and faculty at Addis Ababa University, experience informs us that both formative and summative assessments are used; even thought, the value devoted to each varies from one department to the other, the case in the Education Faculty at Addis Ababa University.

The nature and content of the continuous assessment modalities, prior deliberations among colleagues, and discussions at a department level in both of the institutions about how to materialize continuous assessment have been found to focus highly on the formats of the tests to be used as continuous assess-ments and how much weight each assessment should have at the expense of the important uses of continuous assessment to inform and guide teaching and learning process.

It was however reported that there have been some instances where teaching approaches and materials have been adapted to enhance the process. The data used to guide and inform this process have been very rarely secured from the current 'continuous tests' administered, but from those continuous tests and final exams administered in the previous years. Even though the instructional process has seemed to procure valuable inputs from the assessment data collected from previous continuous assessments, new inputs that could be switched on due to the dynamic nature of the teaching and learning process may not be captured for the current 'continuous tests' have not been exploited for immediate progressive and diagnostic purposes. Thus the continuous assessments like the final exam seemed to direct future instructional attention than the current one in both of the universities.

Specifically in Unity University, 'continuous tests' were supposed to be administered as per the assessment modality of every course so as to encourage the routine of the assessment to be an ongoing. Unlike this expected practice, it was reported that teachers have not preferred to conduct classes on the same period they administered their tests. Students also agree with this practice. Their reason for this is that the majority of the students have been showing divided attention to follow a lesson conducted before or after the tests. This seems to imply that students are highly affected by the notion that assessments are only used to judge their performances. Students' interview has also revealed practices that there have been some cases where 4 or 5 'continuous tests' were administered only during the last two final weeks of the semester. The two cases pointed out above seem to question whether or not the practice of continuous assessment is really on an going process.

Focus: Yohannes (2006:13) pointed out that "the teaching and learning within the Ethiopian higher education are presently very teacher-led and curriculum-based that focus on the contents to be covered. Course objectives generally cover knowledge but often not skills and attitudes. Instructors usually use lecture notes that mostly work in a "chalk and talk" situation". Generally speaking about Ethiopian higher education, Yohannes (2006), as it has also been supported by many of the research participants of this study, noted that problem solving abilities, communication and team work skills, which are important areas students need to develop are not assessed. He has in fact gone to the conclusion that "the assessment methods in the Ethiopian higher

education institutions are relatively ineffective" (Yohannes, 2006).

An investigation on the assessed 'continuous test' papers in both of the institutions seemed to show that the different specific processes that make up a final product of a certain task were observed to contain specific marks which seemed to indicate the attention given to the processes of instruction. However, except indicating specific marks for the different processes in the assessment papers, there has been no clear information that guides the progress of students in the construct assessed. For instance, apart from number grades against each process or section of an assessment instrument, there has been nothing which showed why a student has scored a low mark in a certain process or section and how he/she could improve it. It was also learnt that students' consultation hours are not specifically devoted to discuss issues related to students' weaknesses in assessment results.

Moreover, students in both of the institutions were observed to be given only one chance to be assessed in one construct and that will be graded.   This, consequently, seemed to affect students' motivation to exert systematic efforts after they have identified their weaknesses and strengths from the assessment made. This practice again seems to imply that a heavy focus is given to judge than to develop students' achievement. Otherwise, students should have been given more opportunities, at least one more chance, to experiment and improve their performance before they are judged on their performance. The heavy focus given to the judgmental role of continuous assessment is also clear from an account of experience that attested a significantly heavy focus of discussion made in academic meetings about the format of the tests to be used as continuous assessment and the value each assessment task should have at the expense of the time that should be devoted to deliberate about how continuous assessment should be used to develop   students' learning. Thus, it seems logical to question whether or not the   continuous assessment practices, the formative one "could really be considered as continuous assessment or continuous tests.

It was also inferred from instructors' practices in both institutions that the practice of continuous assessment was mainly focused on cognitive outcomes.   Though giving focus to assess affective outcomes such as motivation and attitude is a crucial element in learning any course at any level, the attention paid to this area seemed to be very minimum.

Feedback: It was revealed from students' interviews in both of the institutions that quick feedback to students was not a common practice after employing continuous assessment. Some instructors who said they have been giving feedback so quickly have done it in terms of number grades only or together with general comments

such as "well done" etc or "you should work hard for the next test".   This kind of general comment is a good source of students' motivation but being implicit in such remark is a higher value given to the judgmental role than the developmental role of the continuous assessment conducted. This is so because "you should work hard for the next test" seems to imply in this context that work hard for the next test that will be about the next unit which assesses another domain. Thus, students seem to have no or little chance to show improved performance on that construct which would be recorded in the mark list. It was also noted that peers and groups were not involved in giving and receiving feedbacks. The trusted source of feedback seemed to be the instructors whose feedback based on the 'assessments', as it was found out, was usually late or if it was the otherwise, it was very general.

Formats of the assessment used and records of the progress development

In most of the cases especially in Unity University, the assessment techniques employed were quizzes and tests whose formats highly lend them to be easy and quick for marking at the expense of other formats that seem to be valid and reliable to the constructs assessed.

Projects, group and home take assignments, though they are prescribed in the assessment modalities, have not usually been materialized for they lend themselves for cheating. But the question is, 'how cheating is cheating?' For example, asking colleagues information about a topic to be written, referring materials to write on a topic and asking colleagues to comment on a piece of writing may not be 'cheating' in the active learning approach. They are rather important processes that students need to pass through to improve their knowledge and skills. Thus, the potential of employing variety of assessment techniques in continuous assessments should not be thus sacrificed for some of the similar reasons pointed out above. Of course, mechanisms to control cheating should also be well thought.

What is more, students' assessment data in both of the institutions has commonly been recorded quantitatively, that is, number grades have been used to indicate students' performance. Qualitative way of recording assessment data which is very much informative about students' progress is found to be not a common practice.

Benchmarking: According to a study conducted by Yohaness (2006), most of the Ethiopian higher education institutions use norm referenced assessment. Specifically, at Addis Ababa University, 5, 10, 70 , 10 and 5% of students are expected to be awarded A,B,C,D and F grades at the end of each course respectively. This policy, however, does not seem to be in effect across all faculties and departments. For instance, in the Department of English Language and Literature Education, what

has been started strictly is checking if the 5 and 10 % for the A and B grades are exceeding what is stipulated. For the other grades like C and D the department usually leaves it to the decision of the respective instructor. However, if it is a practicum course, it is clearly stipulated that a student cannot be awarded an F grade. Unlike possible implementation variations, one can safely conclude that grades at Addis Ababa University and many more public and private higher institutions in Ethiopia are awarded by comparing students' performance who have taken the same assessment. Competition, therefore, is at the center for those who use this as a benchmark of assessment. Competition in this context, however, may divert students' attention from exerting all the maximum effort to meet the desired pre-set criterion and standard to focusing on some strategies that make students better than other fellow students.

Unlike Addis Ababa University, Unity University has been using a fixed grading system since the last five years or more. It uses the following benchmarks to award grades: A+, above 91; A, 85-90; B+, 84-80; B, 75-79; C +, 62-74; C, 50 -61; D, 40-49; F, 39 below. What should be noted here is whether or not the assessment contents are really quality enough to reflect on the desired standard of learning. In short, one can conclude that students' performances in continuous assessment are contributing to their total achievements judged based on norm referencing and criterion referencing at Addis Ababa University and Unity University respectively.

Stakeholders' involvement and administrative support: Department and Dean offices are two of the major stakeholders with regard to continuous and final examination assessments. The involvement of these stakeholders has mainly been to set grade submission deadlines, request and receive number and letter grades of the 'continuous tests' and the summative assessment. This has so far been to check whether or not teachers are using continuous assessments and submitting the final grades on time.

At Addis Ababa University, each department seems to be the one that decides everything about issues related to students' learning assessment. Mostly, colleagues in the department who teach the same course deliberate about possible assessment modalities and the decisions that they have agreed on will be implemented. Recently, however, there are reform policy pronouncements that seem to capitalize the use of continuous and outcome based assessments across all departments in the university.

Experience in many departments at Addis Ababa University shows that mid and final examinations are prepared by exam committees which are assigned by course coordinators and the department head or nominated by the staff of the department. Other formative assessment practices, however, are the responsibility of individual instructor. Facility provision such as stationary and other necessary materials from the administration for students' learning assessment, especially for continuous assessment, seems to be a challenge in this government institution.

At Unity University College, the assessment policy is clearly stipulated. This policy has been a subject of modification for three times. The policy is that every course needs to use both continuous assessments and final examination. The mark distribution had been 60% for continuous assessments and 40% for final exam before 5 years. Then, it was changed to 40% for continuous assessment and 60% for final exam. Now both modes of assessment are given equal values of 50% each. Faculties and departments are expected to monitor the effective implementation of the policy. Departments in this institution are strictly advised by higher academic officials including the president to prepare assessment modalities. To this end, each department has specific assessment modality for every course it offers. The modality usually specifies when to administer, formats to be used, value each assessment has and related prescriptions. Students are pre informed about this. The main purpose of this modality in this context has been to have uniformity in awarding grades to students by different instructors who teach the same course.

Being entirely uniform in using assessment procedures in the context of Unity University College could help to create uniformity among instructors grading practice but it could also be questioned for it:

1. seems to deny teachers creativity in experimenting other assessment techniques for they should have to go in line with what is prescribed in the modality;
2. seems to make the teaching for tests and the learning for tests. This is so because it seems to encourage teachers and students to selectively ignore important areas of a course that have not been considered as assessment areas in the modality;
3. encourages teachers to use previous test papers again and again, and
4. promotes the continuous tests to be used as servants to the teaching which seemed to deny their interwoven relationships.

It was found out that the major concern of deans and department heads in students' learning assessments in these institutions seemed to be to set deadlines, request and receive number and letter grades of the continuous tests [this is the case of Unity University], and summative assessment. What is more, delaying students' grades and grade inflation are the major discussion points. Since most of the 'continuous tests' given by different instructors of one class are conducted at about the same time, students reported that they are confused to decide on the course they should study. This feeling which mainly came from students at Unity University does not only seem to imply the heavy value given to the judgmental role of

assessment but also a lack of administrative support in terms of scheduling the 'continuous tests' given within and across departments. From the aforementioned points, one may tentatively conclude that the involvement of these offices in students' learning assessment seems to focus very much on using assessment to judge students' achievements than to develop their learning.

Conclusion

The findings of the study seem to indicate that the judgmental role of continuous assessment is more practiced than the development role of the assessment. More specifically, the purpose, the focus, the nature of feedback elicited from the continuous assessment data, the formats and the records of the assessment; and the care given to progress students' skills and knowledge have not seemed to be different from what can be witnessed from summative or final exam practices. One can even go to the extent of questioning whether or not these universities practice continuous assessment or continuous tests.

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