

Critical Evaluation of National Curriculum Assessment Policy Programme in Nigeria

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Abstract

Assessment is an integral and influential part of any educational system. Like elsewhere in the world, assessing students in Nigeria is the teachers' crucial task that reflects the progress of classroom instruction. Assessment is seen as a normal classroom interaction and a tool for effective learning and teaching. Classroom assessment is the method for evaluating learners' educational performance and attainment. At different levels and disciplines of education, assessment is used in various forms, systems and for various purposes. Assessment needs to be valid and reliable so as to produce useful information for teachers, students, parents, employers and government. The Nigeria National Policy on Education (2008) emphasized that Assessment for Learning (continuous assessment) shall be used in schools to ensure that learners are given a quality education. This article discusses the Nigeria Assessment For Learning Policy in regard to its validity, reliability and relationship with learning. This article uses 'continuous assessment', 'formative assessment' and 'assessment for learning' interchangeably. The article first presents the brief theoretical issues on educational learning assessment. Secondly, it reviews the related literature in educational assessment in the light of assessment for Learning. Thirdly, the article critiques the assessment for Learning in relation to validity, reliability and its impact on teaching-learning.

Keywords: Assessment, Validity, Reliability, Behaviourism, Constructivism and Sociocultural

Background of the study

Since 1980s, there has been much interest about the nature and type of assessment systems that support learners' conceptual learning (Hickey, 2015) as a result of the high demand for education of quality and education for all (Means, 2014). Parents and employers are demanding information about students' academic abilities and the government also want information about the school system products. Sequel to this, Broadfoot, James, McMeeking, Nuttal and Stierer (1988) stated that it is important to put in place the curriculum and assessment system that will report and identify what school leavers can do. In line with this, Filer (2000) reported that assessment denotes the formal and informal judgements made of students in educational settings. To this end, Gardner (2006) identifies two forms of assessment as: assessment for learning (generally regarded as formative assessment), and assessment of learning (summative assessment).

In Nigeria, assessment for learning was officially introduced into the educational system in 1981 and it was generally called "Continuous Assessment" (NPE, 1980). Though it was argued that the system of continuous assessment is curriculum based assessment programme used for formative issues within classroom are externally directed (De Lisle, 2015), but the system gives students opportunity to make input in the assessment process (Young & Jackman, 2014) which is the goal and aim of constructivist learning theory advocate. The Nigeria National Policy on Education (1980 and 2008) made it mandatory for teachers to adopt the assessment for learning (continuous assessment) policy in their classroom instruction. In view of this, the policy stated that teachers' assessment should account for 40% of the students' final assessment. Modupe and Sunday (2015) state that the examination leakages and other related examination malpractices inherent in summative (one short) assessment, or final examination as it being called, have contributed to the introduction of Assessment For Learning into the Nigeria educational assessment system. Anikweze, (2005) states that continuous assessment is the process of investigating the learners' attainment standard with respect to specified objectives in order to improve learning. The author argues that continuous assessment gives room for the teachers' self-assessment of the teaching method from time to time for greater improvement. While emphasising the comprehensiveness of continuous assessment, Elui (2008) argues that continuous assessment uses multiple methods that combine scores from tests, observations, assignments, oral tests, projects and end of term examination scores to give a comprehensive picture of the learners' abilities. It was argued that the purpose of assessment for learning (classroom based-assessment) is not only to improve and enhance teaching-learning (Brown, Harris & Harnett, 2012), but also to influence the next steps in the learning activities through feedback and interaction (Desforges, 1989; Evans & Abbott, 1998). Also, Elwood, (2006) argues that formative assessment is the frequent and interactive assessment of learners' understanding and progress so as to identify

their needs and to adjust teaching. Though there have been arguments with regard to the efficacy of this policy, it was judged to be transparent (Areiza, 2013). The power of this policy in Nigeria educational learning assessment and its impact will be discussed in relation to its validity and reliability in the next section.

Theories of Learning Underpinning Assessment for Learning

Educational assessment is generally polarized into two categories: formative and summative (Gipps, 1994). According to the author, these broad categories informed by theory are equated with technicalities (how, when, who, where and why). In line with this categorisation, Black (1999) refers to three distinct theories of learning underpinning educational assessment as behaviourism, constructivism and sociocultural learning theories. The behaviourists argue that conditioning is most appropriate for learning. The behaviourists are focused on the “stimulus-response theory” where the test item is used as the stimulus and the answer is a response which can only be observable (Black, 1999, p120). All the teacher has to do is to give the appropriate stimulus, teach by repetition, and consequently reward all appropriate responses. The author of this paper argues that teaching to the test is consistent with this theory. The behaviourist believes that conditioning students to stimulus will bring the appropriate response. On the other hand, the constructivist argues that educational assessments are socially constructed, in that students understand concepts based on the past experiences designed and built within their environment. The constructivist believes that students are active and therefore can analyse and transform new information, as well as learn from experience (Gipps, 1994). Here, it is the duty of the teacher to help students acquire perfect skills and understanding of the concept so as to be able to analyse and transform. It is argued that the constructivist theory of learning acknowledges the importance of prior learning to new learning (James, 2006, p55).

However, contrary to the conditioning and construction of learning assessment beliefs of behaviourists and constructivists, sociocultural theorists argue that human development is a result of negotiation between individuals and the environment. The sociocultural advocate strongly believes that cognitive processes are subsumed by social and cultural processes (Cobb, 1999). Hence, learning occurs as a result of interaction between the learner and more knowledgeable persons, or learning occurs as a result of interaction with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990). The influences of social principles and values, as well as cultural orientations, are always acknowledged and so the teachers’ critical reflection about the assessment is very important (Tierney, 2013, p131). Considering the application of learning theories to educational assessment, one may agree that the constructivist theory of learning is synonymous with Assessment For Learning.

Validity and Reliability of Assessment For Learning (AFL)

Validity and reliability are important qualities of curriculum assessment. Validity and reliability are two different concepts on the same continuum and both apply to all types of assessment. It has been argued that validity and reliability are important criteria for determining the usefulness of any assessment method (Asani, 2012). It was noted earlier in the background of the study section that the purpose of AFL is to improve learning through proper interaction and feedback. Validity and reliability will be examined based on this purpose of AFL.

Validity: The goals of assessment for learning are to provide feedback for teachers so as to modify subsequent teaching, for students to restructure their understanding, and as well as building more powerful ideas (Ogar, 2014). Validity of AFL is its ability to measure these goals. It is the appropriateness and soundness of the assessment for learning in measuring what it intends to measure (Stephen, 2005). It was argued that validity of assessment is measured in terms of specific purpose for which it is designed to serve (Boyle & Fisher, 2007; Darling-Hammett, Herman et al 2013). Boyle and Fisher identified four types of validity which are: face, content, construct and criterion-related validity.

- Face validity basically entails whether the continuous assessment looks as if it measures what it supposed to measure.
- Content validity refers to the degree, fidelity or extent to which assessment for learning covers the competence, relevant tasks or instructional objectives.
- Construct validity is an implication that those who do better using the continuous assessment method are really better in practice.
- Criterion-related validity is about establishing relationships between the result of assessment for learning and other related assessment, (Cunningham, 2005; Bennett, 1999; Boyle & Fisher, 2007; Asani, 2012).

In consideration of the four areas of validity mentioned by Boyle and Fisher (2007), Modupe and Sunday (2015) argued that assessment for learning is more comprehensive, cumulative, systematic and even guidance-oriented than summative assessment, and therefore it is more valid in terms of achieving learning assessment goals. William (1994) described assessment for learning validity as a multi-faceted concept that will not achieve the goal of curriculum assessment. He argued that over-blowing the assessment for learning is short-circuiting learning because it will put teachers under pressure, thereby making them concentrate on their favourite concepts and those that will be covered by the assessment (teach to test). This notion of William’s was, however, debunked from the report of the research conducted by Ubong and Wokocho (2009). They argued that assessment for learning strengthened students’ academic effort by ensuring that they do not wait

until the end of term examination before putting more effort to their studies, but instead sustain learning throughout the term. Despite the categorization of validity by Boyle and Fisher, Filer (2000), maintained that considering the social context under which the classroom assessment is taken, its validity cannot be fully guaranteed as a result of teachers' attitude and interpretation to the assessment materials and learners' responses, coupled with influences from other learners. In line with Filers' argument, Ogar (2014), while acknowledging the importance of continuous assessment, argued that factors such as large classes and lack of qualified teachers affect Assessment For Learning Policy in Nigeria. However, the assessment for learning need not be a contentious issue since the Assessment Reform Group (2002, p2), in defining AFL, argued that AFL is to "identify where learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there". In line with this argument of definition, Black (2001) argued that AFL offers better interaction between teachers and students; hence teachers are able to understand the students' academic progress and students becomes more responsible and active because they are part of the assessment review. But Gardner (2012) argued that assessment for learning is not commonly used in describing summative assessment which is not the case with Nigeria (NPE, 2008). The author therefore questions the need for AFL which is of little importance to educational assessment. This Gardner's assertion portrays the usefulness as well as the validity of assessment for learning.

In recognizing how valid Assessment For Learning is in measuring students' learning progress, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) in Anderson (2014) and Sadler (1989) stated that the judgements within Assessment For Learning are meant to shape and improve learner's proficiency so that learners can attain a higher level of achievement in their studies. To support these reports, Black and William (2009) noted that the decisions about subsequent steps in instruction that can be better are made through the teachers' and learners' interpretations of evidence about learners' achievement elicited by assessment for learning. In addition to this, Anderson (2014) noted that consequence of assessment for learning is achievement of stimulation for subsequent learning, and therefore it is a valid assessment process.

Moreover, Ipaye (1982) argued that assessment for learning places students within continuous tension because some teachers give students unannounced assessment when teachers are not prepared to teach their lessons. The tension caused through unprepared assessment from both teachers and students has serious implications in assessing students for learning purposes. Ayodele (2012) therefore questioned the efficacy of both content and criterion-related validity of this assessment process due to the negative attitude learners have to their studies, which affects the assessment scores. The authors' argument perhaps may not have substantive effect because it is also argued that the assessment for the learning programme leads to high achievement of desired learning gains since its validity lies on the quality feedback and students involvement in the whole assessment process (Bonner, 2013).

However, Black (1999) argued that there are issues of great concern in the use of Assessment For Learning to achieve learning goals with the negative impact associated with an over-emphasis on marks and grades, comparing students with one another which encourage competition; rather than giving advice and seeking personal improvement. Assessment For Learning was noted to be efficient in assessing those aspects of attainment which cannot be assessed using summative assessment (McGaw, 1984), but unwanted influences, such as bias against or for a student and making teachers take role of a judge instead of a mentoring and guidance role, lowers the strength and validity of assessment for learning (Wood, 1991). But despite the negative comments about continuous assessment, Elui, (2006) maintained that for improvement of learning, the purpose of continuous assessment is to offer greater opportunities in achieving comprehensiveness of what the learner is to learn. One might conclude that the general belief and acknowledgement of all the authors is that Assessment For Learning improves learning and this shows that it is a valid assessment method. The result (information) from Assessment For Learning is used for 'improvement' or 'adjustment' of teaching as stated by almost all the authors and acknowledged by Elwood (2006, p218) are all pointers to the validity of assessment for learning.

Reliability: The concept of what it is for Assessment For Learning to be reliable will be discussed by looking at opinions, arguments and statements of various authors. In classroom assessment, reliability refers to the consistency of the assessment in measuring the skill it is designed to measure. It is the stability, accuracy and consistency of Assessment For Learning over time. The assessment scores also known as 'obtained scores' (Boyle & Fisher, 2007) is known to have an error component which significantly affects the reliability of assessment for learning. The types of reliability in classroom assessment as argued by Desforges (1989); Buckendahl & Robert (2005); Boyle & Fisher (2007) are:

- Inter-rater reliability. This is encountered when two or more assessors assess students on the same quality. The degree of their agreement to the measurement of that quality is called inter-rater reliability.
- Internal consistency. This is measure checking whether each question in the assessment for learning assesses the same thing. This is calculated in various ways using Cronbach's alpha, Kuder-Richardson KR20 and KR21 and others.
- Test-retest reliability. This requires the same group of students to sit for the same continuous assessment twice or thrice. The number of attempts will be correlated to give test-retest reliability coefficient.

Benett (1999) noted that assessment is said to be reliable if the students' assessment is the same when re-assessed in the same context at a different time or with a different assessor. Looking at Benett's argument, one may ask: should students be gathered and reassessed before concluding that AFL is reliable considering the goal or purpose of Assessment For Learning? On this note, Gipps (1994) and Black & William (2006) argued that for the purpose of guiding learning for a given concept, the AFL must be consistent with pupils' response as well as in assessing the response. It was mentioned earlier that examination leakages, malpractices and other ills associated with the almighty summative assessment led to the introduction of Assessment For Learning in the Nigerian education system. This means that it is not reliable to focus solely on summative assessment, hence the introduction of AFL for reliability of assessment. Although Asani (2012, pp3) has argued that reliability of AFL is the "measure of the relative magnitude of variability in scores due to error". The author however identified assessors' judgement and learners' state of mind as factors which affect the reliability of AFL. In view of this, the AFL may not be 100% reliable because the learner cannot be in the same state of mind at all times, neither does the assessor give the same judgment at all times. Perhaps, this may be the reason for the federal government to specify that continuous assessment should have 40% and term examination 60% to mitigate the reliability effect.

Moreover, assessment for learning policy in Nigeria is a combination of classroom assessment and term examinations. Reliability is less prominent in classroom (teacher) assessment and more prominent in term examinations. To ensure reliability of the Assessment For Learning Policy of the federal government, term examinations are jointly set, but marked by the subject teachers from different schools and returned back after marking for the class subject teacher to check and record. This action may be to reduce teachers' bias judgement and student nervousness so that consistency of assessment scores, as argued by Asani (2012), can be achieved.

Assessment for learning practice is a policy that involves the teachers and students mostly within the classroom. The process is not strictly under formal or unified supervision or moderation except for the class teacher. Emotionally, the teacher may appear to be generous and overestimate the students' assessment. The generosity in teachers' assessment or marking was argued by Wood (1991) to be a way of teachers encouraging their students. This by implication is a means of raising false and spurious expectations (Spear, 1989, cited in Wood, 1991), which may be seen as rendering the assessment method or practice unreliable. Notwithstanding teachers' emotions, Black (1998) argues that Assessment for Learning serves for corrective purposes which have a positive effect on the learner who is being assessed and the teacher who uses the result. The author noted that confidence is placed on AFL because of the purpose which it is meant to serve. Perhaps, the author's use of the word 'confidence' is to indicate the reliability of assessment for learning. So reliability is a matter of confidence. To this end, Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002) state that every learner can improve in confidence is the underpinning statement of Assessment for Learning. Also Torrance (2011) argues that confidence reposed on assessment for learning is because of feedback and interaction factors which are important towards improving students' learning and attainment.

Moreover, reliability of Assessment For Learning can be found through reassessment or administration of two similar-matched assessments of the student; and if the student scores the same in each assessment, then the assessment can be assumed to be reliable. The issue of determining the extent of reliability of Assessment For Learning is not a straightforward task. William (1994) argues that reliability of Assessment For Learning is a concept which cannot be achieved directly. Perhaps this may be reason for not placing too much emphasis on the reliability of AFL by various authors since AFL is a series of continuous and repeated events or exercises in which information from the activities are used by teachers and learners to decide the next teaching and learning steps (Harlen, 2007). In view of this, the internal consistency, test-retest and inter-rater as measures of the assessments' reliability stated earlier, may not necessarily be applied to assessment for learning. This is because every stage of teaching is assessed and remedial action taken for the improvement of learning. This is also the position of Black & William (2006) in Gardner (Eds) who argued that the issue of inter-rater, internal consistency and test-retest are non-issues with regard to Assessment For Learning because all evidence and scores collected are interpreted so as to guide learning in a specific task and not to generalise to form overall assessment. The most confusing aspect of this argument is that students' academic qualities normally change over a short period of time, and so all the calculated error and reliability coefficient may be attributed to assessment error or reflection of students' learning progress. Repeating the assessment at a later time (weeks or months after) in order to ascertain the level of this assessments' reliability is a setting back of the learners' learning progress. Finally, assessment for learning was argued to be reliable because of its focus on specific learning need for criterion referencing (Black, 2001; Torrance, 2011). This is also in line with Newton's (2007) argument that the reliability of Assessment For Learning is its focus on smaller instructional units for testing narrow segments of proficiency for the purpose of helping learners to learn and improve. Hence, Qingping & Dennis (2012) argued that true reliability may not be met because various methods are used in estimating the reliability of assessment scores which involve different assumptions which might not be applicable in the class at a given time.

Impact of Assessment For Learning on Teaching-Learning

Considering the earlier discussions, one may say that the Assessment For Learning Policy is in accordance with a constructivist approach which advocates that all activities should aim at improving learning (Gipps, 1994). Assessment For Learning is a continuous event in the classroom. It is a feedback and interactive policy programme. It is important to note that good teachers recognise the need to understand how their students understand, reason and think and they use it to improve students' learning. Ogar (2014) argued that Assessment For Learning places much emphasis on helping students to learn through their own effort. Through the feedback from the assignment, students will make adjustments for improvement. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the continuous assessment policy enables the teachers to adjust their method of teaching as a result of problems encountered during the assessment so that students' learning will progress effectively. Smith (2003) argued that Assessment For Learning makes available enough information to the teachers from which they make reasonable decisions on the students in a specific domain.

Elui (2008) argued that Assessment For Learning Policy gives greater opportunities to both teachers and students in achieving comprehensiveness of what the students learn. The word 'comprehensiveness' is a good choice of word to explain the impact of AFL on teaching-learning. The Assessment For Learning Policy uses combined scores from observations, tests, projects, assignments and term examinations scores to give a comprehensive picture of the students' abilities. Moreover, the Assessment For Learning Policy seeks to solve the specific needs of individual students. This is in line with Anikwezes' (2005) argument that continuous assessment is the process of investigating students' attainment standard with respect to specific objectives. Perhaps, through the feedback and interaction between students and teachers, the teacher will be able to get specific information that will assist in improving students' specific learning difficulties. The Assessment For Learning is a big opportunity to enhance students learning because it is a policy to inculcate on the students, teachers and school authorities as well to imbibe the spirit of consciousness and seriousness. Since the assessment policy is a series of continuous events, it was argued that students do not have to wait until the end of term or semester examination before putting out or exerting effort on their studies, but rather learning is sustained throughout the term or semester (Ubong&Wokocha, 2011). This is also in agreement with the arguments of Asani (2012); San (2016) and Guo& Shi, (2016) that AFL encourages students' academic success and motivation and reduces the tension, anxiety and memorisation associated with examinations. The anxiety and tension reduction is a huge success of the Assessment For Learning Policy in Nigeria because it led to a decrease in examination malpractices and leakages since the students' assessment was no longer based solely on the end of term or final examination (Modupe& Sunday, 2015). Also, the Assessment For Learning Policy gives equal opportunity to both boys and girls in classroom assessment since the goal is not solely towards a public examination. The policy seeks to reduce unequal achievement between boys and girls in public examinations as argued in Elwood (2005), because the assessment is a continuous event with feedback and interaction (NPE, 2004 & 2008) between the teacher and every student.

Furthermore, Nigeria, like other parts of the world, is technologically advancing. New sets of technological tools are entering into the world on daily basis. Practically, Assessment For Learning has far reaching implications not only for teachers and students but for the society and world at large. The assessment policy is judged to be very efficient and effective for practical oriented programmes (Ubong&Wokocha, 2011), but the policy is equally good for both science and non-science oriented disciplines because it is easy to teach, learn and assess through scaffolding and because it is an interactive policy programme (Abraham & Jones, 2016). Assessment For Learning is a revolutionary method for shifting the classroom into an interactive dynamic where students and teachers are collectively engaged in the process of learning new materials and also evaluating learning (Dewey, 2015). In other words, Assessment For Learning brings fairness to the teaching-learning process in that it gives students opportunity to learn without bias (Tierney, 2013, p130). It was in recognition of the contribution of assessment for learning in achieving its objective that the UK Department of Education and Science (1988a) report, in Black (2001) warned that summative assessment should not dominate and undermine efforts of teachers in meeting their major responsibility of promoting their students' learning formative assessment. This report showcased the relevance of Assessment For Learning.

However, despite the contributions made by Assessment For Learning to teaching-learning, the policy still has some flaws. First, there are problems of score transformation and the conduct of continuous assessment in some schools. Ayodele (2012) argued that there is no uniformity in terms of quality of teachers and staff strength in schools across the country. This adversely affects the quality of instruction, assessment, feedback and interaction between teachers and students. Teachers do not have enough time to mark and record scores due to the student population. Lack of well-trained teachers in student assessment is also argued to be a contributing factor to poor implementation of the policies such as marking, recording, feedback and interaction in the assessment for learning process (Ekanen&Ekpiken, 2013). Secondly, non-availability of good teaching and learning resources in classroom is also identified as a factor that impedes the effective teaching, learning and assessment in the Assessment For Learning (Adewumi&Monisola, 2013). In the class where materials needed for teacher and students to make demonstrations are not readily available, perhaps the teacher has to use hand and mouth to demonstrate to the students on air and the practical assessment will also turn to alternative to practical. Adewumi and Monisola noted that inadequate laboratory and non-availability of teaching materials affects assessment of students to

determine their learning attainment and creates difficulties to assist them to improve. On the long-run and considering the arguments made by various authors, one may say that Assessment For Learning has a positive impact on the teaching-learning programme.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the Nigeria Educational Assessment Policy. The Assessment For Learning Policy was introduced in schools in the 1980s due to the sole reliance on external examinations and the subsequent problems witnessed such as tension, anxieties and malpractices of various nature. The aim of the Assessment For Learning Policy was primarily to help improve the students' learning through interactions from the feedback given by the teachers. The validity of the policy were acknowledged by the stakeholders due to the fact that its purpose, of identifying learners learning difficulties so as to help improve their learning, did not yield negative results. This is apparent from the interaction between students and teachers as a result of feedback from the teachers' assessment. Also, the policy is said to be reliable because it was argued to be a series of continuous events and measures only specific objectives at a specific period. The policy has made significant contributions to the classroom teaching-learning process such as: decreasing the emphasis on external examinations thereby reducing tensions and anxieties in students arising from 'one short examination'; assisting not only the improvement of teachers' teaching methods but also the ability of students to identify their learning difficulties themselves. The Assessment For Learning has problems of inadequately trained teachers in the area of assessment, overpopulation of students, and a lack of teaching materials. However, one might rightly say that the policy has done much good to the teaching-learning process and needs to be sustained.

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