

Continuous Assessment: Inconvenient or advantageous?

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Abstract

In this first year of the implementation of the LMD system at the section of English (University of Oran), many interrogations related to this new teaching perspective raise. One of these concern the continuous student assessment. This is constraining for both the teachers and the learners. As for the students, the frequency of the tests they are to sit for in a limited time and the number of disciplines they study and have to be assessed in is a considerable challenge. Teachers are to keep setting examination questions, to find ways to sort out the issue of high numbers of students in very large classes. The inconvenience lies, on the one hand, in the invigilation which is not obvious as the test is to be undertaken during the class time and principally in the evaluation process which turns out to be tedious and time-taking, on the other hand. Besides, continuous assessment implies continuous exam accounts that must be carried during the class time as well. This is a serious hindrance to the teaching progression as much of the teaching time is left out on behalf of assessment. This makes the question of time management very challenging.

Introduction:

This academic year has begun by the adoption of the LMD system in the section of English. The pedagogical architecture has consequently been reshaped. This could be noticed, partly through a restructuring of the disciplines to be taught. Some of the previously existing modules were revised and some totally new ones were included. While, for instance, the teaching of the

listening and the speaking skills were carried separately, they came to be fused together into one module called oral expression and comprehension. English for specific purposes has been introduced. Here is a list of the disciplines included in the first year curriculum of the ancient system and the modules taught in the context of the LMD system:

The modules of the first year within the ancient system	The modules of the first year of the LMD System
Language Modules	Language Modules
Grammar	Morpho-syntax
Written Expression	Written Expression
Listening Comprehension	Oral Expression and Comprehension
Reading Comprehension	Content Modules
Conversation	Concepts and Currents in Linguistics
Content Modules	Language Evolution
Linguistics	Phonetics
Phonetics	Introduction to Literature
Other Modules	Introduction to Culture
Arabic	Typology
	English for Specific Purposes
	Other Modules
	Methodology
	Human and Social Sciences
	Computing
	Foreign Language (Spanish / German)
	Arabic

The subjects taught to students of English are not the only area that has undergone such a noticeable reorganisation. As M. Milani (2004: 23) argues *“defining the learning content without taking the issue of assessment into consideration will not solve any of the problems to which students are sensitive”*¹⁰ Some of the necessary readjustments have been undertaken in accordance with the outstanding objectives of the LMD reform. The LMD system takes the learners’ needs into account because one of its leading objectives is the involvement of the students who should participate actively in their own education and training. The LMD system implies, in this regard, a towering sense of responsibility from the side of the learner who must resultantly put in more efforts and bear all the constraints he faces throughout his university course: group work, continuous research works to be carried individually such as talks on particular subjects, continual assessment, internship, work experience, etc.

1. Ongoing Assessment in the Context of the LMD System:

One of the principles of the LMD system is the ongoing assessment of the teaching / learning practices to guarantee the efficiency of university education. This new pedagogical ingredient has raised many interrogations owing to the various misunderstandings and teaching / learning irregularities it has generated. Difficulties in handling this new issue can be observed both on the side of the students and the teachers. Some of

¹⁰ My translation from French.

the teachers and the students of the English section were requested to list the hindrances they encountered when dealing with continual assessment. These were summarised into the table 1:

Hindrances for students	Hindrances for teachers
1- The most recurrent difficulty students have referred to is the simultaneity of tests: all the remaining problems come from that one. 2- Having to sit for up to 3 tests in one day compels the students to: - sacrifice attendance to some classes and lectures in order to prepare for the tests - give priority to some modules over others, for instance phonetics is given priority over information and communication technologies in education - their ability to concentrate is reduced. - their sense of creativity is lessened: submitting more than one project at a time hinders their creative potential. 3- Quality is sacrificed on behalf of quantity.	1- Continuously setting examination questions. 2- Finding ways to sort out the issue of high numbers of students in very large classes: the inconvenience lies, on the one hand, in the invigilation which is not obvious as the test is to be undertaken during the class time and principally in the evaluation process which turns out to be tedious and time-taking, on the other hand. 3- Continuous exam accounts that must be carried during the class time. This is a serious hindrance to the teaching progression as much of the teaching time is left out on behalf of assessment. This makes the question of time management very challenging.

Table 1. The hindrances that continuous assessment triggers among teachers learners

1.1. A Diversification of Assessment Types:

The perspective of continuous assessment aims to allow the students to demonstrate their competence using the particular conditions that show them to best advantage. This might mean giving an oral presentation, writing about a topic that is familiar and so forth. Indeed, Shepard (2000 p.48) sees variety in assessment techniques as a virtue, not just because different learning goals are amenable to assessment by different devices, but because the mode of assessment interacts in complex ways with the very nature of what is being assessed. In a reading class, for instance, the ability to summarise a text after reading it might be a different learning construct than being able to answer comprehension questions about it; both might be important instructionally. Even for the same learning objective, there are compelling reasons to use more than one assessment mode, both to ensure sound measurement and to support development of flexible and robust understanding.

Each type of assessment is to be adapted to a particular part of the syllabus: as a general rule, teachers should use a variety of assessment tools, choosing in each case the most suitable form of assessment that best permits them to check understanding. Miliani (2004: 90) advocates that *“teachers should locate the types of assessment in relation to the different phases of the learning process”*. Sometimes this will mean using more traditional-looking quizzes and examinations. As is the case for all assessment modes, there should be an explicit rationale for using particular assessment techniques both with

respect to the format of test questions and for the 'on-demand' character of test events. Essay questions, for example, may still be the best means for students to demonstrate their ability to use historical evidence to support an argument. A set of assessment types is illustrated below.

1.1.1. Performance Based Assessment:

Performance-based assessments are based on classroom instruction and everyday tasks. Performance-based assessments can be used to assess the students' language proficiency and academic achievement through oral reports, presentations, demonstrations, and written assignments. These assessments can include both processes (e.g., several drafts of a writing sample) and products (e.g., team projects). When using performance-based assessments, it is important to establish clear and fair criteria from the beginning. It might be helpful to develop these criteria in conjunction with other teachers. Performance-based assessments promote a wide range of responses and do not typically produce one single, correct answer. Therefore, evaluation of student performances and products must be based on teacher judgment, using the criteria specified for each task.

Performance-based assessment (and instructional) activities must be geared to the students' level of English proficiency. Performance-based assessment activities can concentrate on oral communication and/or reading. Here are examples of commonly-used activity types designed for assessing speaking or reading:

- Reading with partners
- Retelling stories
- Role playing

- Giving descriptions or instructions using visual or written prompts
- Oral reporting to the whole class
- Completing dialogue or conversation through written prompts
- Debating, either one-on-one or taking turns in small groups
- Brainstorming
- Completing incomplete stories

Using performance-based assessments makes it possible to assess a considerable number of items at a time. For example, in a debate activity, a teacher might assess the learners' abilities to:

- 1) Select the vocabulary items that drive their ideas home directly and accurately.
- 2) Express a given opinion and argue about it fluently.

1.1.3. Portfolio Assessment:

Borrowing from the arts and from professions such as architecture and advertising where individuals collect samples of their best work to demonstrate their talents and skills, the use of portfolios in education provides more authentic documentation of students' achievements. In fact, a portfolio structure can help teachers and students become more systematic in analyzing and learning from student work than would ordinarily occur as a part of instructional activities. On <http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/assessment/informal> it is claimed that by using portfolio assignments, students gain experience with processes of scientific

explanation, argument and presentation, and students learn to apply standards of scientific plausibility. Portfolios are, thus, the vehicle for conceptualising and structuring classroom interaction.

Portfolios are practical ways of assessing student work throughout the entire year. With this method, teachers can systematically collect descriptive records of a variety of student work over time that reflects growth toward the achievement of specific curricular objectives.

Portfolios include information, sample work, and evaluations that serve as indicators for student performance. By documenting student performance over time, portfolios are a better way to crosscheck student progress than just one measure alone. Portfolios can include:

- Samples of written student work, such as stories, completed forms, exercise sheets, and descriptions
- Drawings representing student content knowledge and proficiencies
- Tapes of oral work, such as role-playing, presentations, or an oral account of a trip
- Teacher descriptions of student accomplishments, such as performance on oral tasks
- Formal test data, checklists, and rating sheets

Checklists or summary sheets of tasks and performances in the student's portfolio can help you make instructional decisions and report consistently and reliably. Checklists can also help you collect the same kind of data for each student. In this way you can assess both the progress of one student and of the class as a whole. According to Au

and Valencia (1997) *“the benefit teachers derived from learning to score portfolios and the improvement in students’ writing proficiency were sufficient to warrant their use”*. In addition, here are a few ways that students can have an active role in the portfolio process:

- Students can select samples of their work and reflect on their own growth over time.
- Together with students, teachers can set tangible, realistic improvement goals for future projects.

1.2. Teacher Assessment:

Continuous students’ assessment is the best means to assess the progression of the teaching process (es) and the students’ response to the latter. Here is a sample language and academic assessment form proposed on <http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/assessment/informal> that teachers can adapt and complete at regular time intervals – the site proposes a monthly basis - to learn about the overall academic and English proficiency progress of students.

2. The Advantages of Continuous assessment:

If assessment insights are to be used to move learning along rather than merely to keep score on how much learning has occurred so far, than assessment has to occur all along the instruction, not just at end points. Through a continuous and repeated evaluation of the students’ works, teachers can witness the students’ advancement. Students and teachers of the English section have been requested to write a list of the advantages they noticed about the fact of having several tests in all the modules

they study. The most recurrent of these were summarised in table 2.

Advantages for students	Advantages for teachers
1- The students claimed that continuous assessment permits them to: - keep paying attention to what is being done in class as they know they might be assessed on any item that has been dealt with in class. - acquire a sense of responsibility and maturity - progress continuously as they become acquainted with the way their teachers phrase the instructions.	1- Teachers become able to : - Check understanding of the biggest number of students especially in large classes - Make the students play a very active role in their learning. - Evaluate their teaching strategies as well as the course progression.

Table 2. The Advantages of continuous assessment for Students and Teachers

Students and teachers should not be overwhelmed by the difficulty that continuous assessment constitutes. The latter turns out to be very advantageous. The very classroom practices make it possible for assessment to be used as part of the learning process.

Conclusion:

It is well known that the diversification of assessment formats can have significant effects on performance levels. This does not imply, however, that one assessment type is more accurate than others. Besides, from a teaching perspective, teachers should not always rely on the format that is most comfortable. Effective assessment should focus on areas of weakness as well as strengths and ensure that students' knowledge becomes increasingly flexible and robust across contexts of application. To do this, teachers must be aware of how variation in assessment or instructional task features affects performance.

Continuous assessment ensures learners' autonomy and permits them to develop life-long learning habits. On the one hand, one of the leading principles of adult learning is that adults are, indeed, autonomous and self-directed. On the other hand, autonomy and the creation of a learning continuity are the core foundations of the LMD reform. Learning is helped by assessment and feedback as part of instruction: assessment-based classroom routines and student's self-assessment might be used to develop metacognitive skills and students' responsibility for their own learning. These endeavors might become so seamlessly part of classroom discourse that students develop a learning orientation, motivated by the desire to increase competence instead of performing to get good grades. The whole culture of the classroom should be changed so that students and teachers both look to assessment as a source of insight and help instead of its being the occasion for meting out rewards and punishments.

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