

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Continuous assessment (CA) is a key component of Nigeria's educational system, it is intended to provide systematic evidence of students' learning through multiple assessment activities conducted over time, thereby improving instruction and learning outcomes (Nitko & Brookhart, 2014). Despite its recognized value, concerns persist regarding its implementation and effectiveness. This qualitative descriptive study explored teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment in Nigerian secondary schools, focusing on their understanding, implementation experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected teachers from public and private secondary schools, and the data were analysed thematically. Teachers generally viewed continuous assessment as an effective means of monitoring students' progress, improving instruction, and promoting regular learning. However, its implementation is constrained by inadequate assessment literacy, large class sizes, insufficient instructional resources, administrative pressures, and poor institutional support. The study concludes that although teachers appreciate the pedagogical value of continuous assessment, systemic challenges limit its effectiveness. It recommends regular professional development, improved teacher-student ratios, provision of adequate assessment resources, and strengthened quality assurance mechanisms to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of continuous assessment practices in Nigerian secondary schools.

Keywords: Continuous assessment, assessment, teachers' perceptions, educational measurement, secondary schools, Nigeria, qualitative descriptive study.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is central to effective teaching and learning because it provides evidence of students' progress and guides instructional improvement. Contemporary educational practice has shifted from reliance on terminal examinations to continuous assessment, which evaluates learners throughout the instructional process. Continuous assessment therefore serves both formative and summative purposes by providing regular feedback and supporting improved learning outcomes.

Continuous assessment became an official component of Nigeria's educational system following the adoption of the National Policy on Education in 1977. The policy requires assessment to be continuous, comprehensive, cumulative, and guidance-oriented rather than dependent on a single examination (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013). It encompasses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains through tests, assignments, projects, observations, and related assessment techniques (Nitko & Brookhart, 2014; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019).

The introduction of continuous assessment was largely intended to address the shortcomings of traditional examinations, which often encourage rote learning, increase examination anxiety, and provide limited evidence of learners' overall development (Faleye & Afolabi, 2018). Properly implemented, continuous assessment promotes regular study habits, facilitates early identification of learning difficulties, and enables teachers to adapt instruction to learners' needs (Airasian & Russell, 2008).

Despite these advantages, implementation in many Nigerian secondary schools has remained problematic. Studies indicate that continuous assessment is frequently reduced to periodic tests whose scores are merely combined with examination results, contrary to the comprehensive evaluation envisaged by national policy (Okpala & Onocha, 2018). Questions have consequently been raised regarding the validity, reliability, and fairness of assessment practices.

Teachers occupy a central position in implementing continuous assessment because their knowledge, beliefs, and assessment competence determine how assessment is conducted and utilized. Brookhart (2017) observes that teachers' perceptions influence instructional decisions and the educational value derived from assessment information. Understanding teachers' views is therefore essential for improving assessment practices.

Empirical evidence suggests that although Nigerian teachers generally appreciate continuous assessment, they face challenges including inadequate assessment literacy, limited professional training, heavy workload, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate instructional resources (Ojerinde & Falayajo, 2016; Aina & Adedaja, 2020). Recent studies further indicate that teacher competence, institutional support, and availability of assessment resources significantly influence effective implementation (Muhammed et al., 2020; Babatimehin et al., 2025; Ezekiel & Bawa, 2025).

Most previous Nigerian studies have relied on quantitative approaches, providing limited understanding of teachers' lived experiences. Qualitative investigations remain relatively few despite their potential to provide deeper insights into classroom realities. This study therefore adopts a qualitative descriptive design to explore teachers' understanding, experiences, implementation challenges, and suggestions for improving continuous assessment practices in Nigerian secondary schools.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Continuous assessment was introduced into Nigeria's educational system to ensure comprehensive and continuous evaluation of learners. However, its effective implementation remains a major concern. Many teachers encounter inadequate training, limited assessment literacy, heavy workload, insufficient instructional resources, and overcrowded classrooms, making it difficult to implement assessment in accordance with national policy.

Although several studies have examined continuous assessment in Nigeria, most have employed quantitative methods and provide limited understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions. Consequently, there remains a need for qualitative evidence that explains how teachers perceive continuous assessment, the challenges they encounter, and strategies for improving its implementation. This study addresses that gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sought to:

- examine teachers' understanding of continuous assessment in Nigerian secondary schools;
- explore teachers' experiences in implementing continuous assessment;
- identify challenges affecting its implementation; and
- determine teachers' suggestions for improving continuous assessment practices.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addressed the following questions:

How do teachers perceive continuous assessment in Nigerian secondary schools?

What are their experiences in implementing continuous assessment?

What challenges affect its implementation?

What strategies do teachers propose for improving continuous assessment practices?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study provides useful evidence for teachers, school administrators, curriculum planners, and policy makers by highlighting teachers' experiences and the factors influencing effective implementation of continuous assessment. Its findings contribute to educational measurement literature in Nigeria and provide practical recommendations for strengthening classroom assessment and guiding future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Concept of Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment (CA) is the systematic collection and use of information on students' learning throughout instruction. Unlike traditional examinations, which rely mainly on end-of-term tests, CA provides continuous evidence of learners' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development, enabling teachers to improve instruction and provide timely feedback (Airasian & Russell, 2008; Nitko & Brookhart, 2014).

The increasing acceptance of CA arose from the limitations of one-shot examinations, which often assess only a narrow range of learning outcomes (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Through tests, assignments, projects, observations, portfolios, and practical activities, CA offers learners multiple opportunities to demonstrate competence while encouraging continuous improvement.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) requires assessment to be continuous, comprehensive, cumulative, and guidance-oriented. However, researchers have observed that implementation frequently departs from these ideals. In many schools, CA is reduced to periodic tests and assignments, with limited attention to

practical skills, attitudes, and behavioural development (Faleye & Afolabi, 2018; Okpala & Onocha, 2018). Consequently, assessment often emphasizes grading rather than improving learning.

Principles and Characteristics of Continuous Assessment

Effective CA is guided by continuity, comprehensiveness, objectivity, fairness, and cumulative evaluation. Assessment should occur regularly throughout instruction, cover all learning domains, apply consistent scoring standards, and combine evidence from multiple assessment activities to provide a balanced evaluation of learners (Nitko & Brookhart, 2014; Brookhart, 2017).

These principles enhance the validity and reliability of assessment by minimizing the effects of one-time examinations. Nevertheless, their implementation in Nigeria is constrained by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and insufficient teacher preparation (Aina & Adedola, 2020).

Teachers' Perceptions of Continuous Assessment

Teachers play a central role in CA because they design assessment tasks, evaluate learners, interpret results, and provide feedback. Their beliefs and assessment competence therefore influence classroom practice. Brookhart (2017) argues that teachers who regard assessment as a tool for learning are more likely to employ formative strategies and provide constructive feedback than those who view assessment mainly as a grading exercise.

Studies consistently show that teachers appreciate the educational value of CA. Brown and Harris (2014) reported that teachers considered it useful for improving classroom interaction, identifying learning difficulties, and supporting instructional adjustment. Similar findings in Nigeria indicate that teachers believe CA promotes regular study habits, reduces dependence on terminal examinations, and improves monitoring of students' progress (Ojerinde & Falayajo, 2016).

Positive perceptions, however, do not always translate into effective practice. Teachers frequently encounter challenges in designing valid assessment instruments, maintaining records, managing workload, and providing timely feedback (Faleye & Afolabi, 2018). Assessment literacy also remains a major concern. According to Popham (2018), teachers with sound assessment knowledge are more likely to implement valid and reliable assessment practices. Recent Nigerian evidence similarly indicates that although teachers understand the broad principles of school-based assessment, many still require further training in classroom assessment techniques, record keeping, feedback, and interpretation of assessment results (Babatimehin et al., 2025).

Challenges of Implementing Continuous Assessment in Nigeria

Although CA is widely recognized as beneficial, its implementation in Nigerian schools faces several obstacles. Inadequate teacher preparation remains a major challenge, as many teachers receive limited professional training in educational measurement and evaluation (Ojerinde & Falayajo, 2016; Popham, 2018).

Large class sizes further hinder effective implementation by making individualized assessment, feedback, and record keeping difficult (Aina & Adedola, 2020). In addition, many schools lack adequate instructional materials, technological facilities, and efficient record-keeping systems, forcing teachers to depend largely on paper-based assessments.

Administrative pressures also affect assessment quality. Teachers are often required to submit scores within strict deadlines, encouraging speed rather than thoroughness. Some schools reportedly exert pressure on teachers to inflate students' scores to improve institutional image (Okpala & Onocha, 2018).

Concerns have equally been raised about the reliability and validity of teacher-made assessments because differences in assessment standards may reduce comparability across schools (Nitko & Brookhart, 2014). Recent studies by Muhammed et al. (2020) and Ezekiel and Bawa (2025) confirm that inadequate resources, insufficient training, poor monitoring, and institutional limitations continue to undermine effective implementation. These findings suggest that strengthening continuous assessment requires improvements in teacher education, funding, and quality assurance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Assessment for Learning (AfL) Theory and the Constructivist Learning Theory. Assessment for Learning views assessment as a means of improving learning through continuous feedback rather than merely measuring achievement (Black & Wiliam, 2009). The theory emphasizes formative assessment, learner participation, and instructional adjustment. It is relevant because teachers' perceptions determine whether assessment is used primarily for learning or simply for grading.

Constructivist Learning Theory, advanced by Vygotsky (1978), holds that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, experience, and feedback. Continuous assessment supports this process by providing regular opportunities for teacher–learner interaction, reflection, and instructional modification.

Together, these theories provide an appropriate framework for understanding teachers' perceptions and implementation of continuous assessment. While Assessment for Learning emphasizes the formative purpose of assessment, Constructivism highlights its learner-centred and interactive nature. Both reinforce the importance of continuous feedback in improving teaching and learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of continuous assessment in Nigerian secondary schools. The design was considered appropriate because it provides straightforward descriptions of participants' experiences in their natural settings (Sandelowski, 2000).

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Nigeria using selected public and private secondary schools located in urban and semi-urban areas. Secondary schools were chosen because continuous assessment is a major component of students' evaluation at this level, and teachers are directly responsible for its implementation.

Population of the Study

The population comprised all teachers in public and private secondary schools in Nigeria. The accessible population consisted of teachers with at least three years of teaching experience and active involvement in continuous assessment practices.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select 20 teachers from 10 secondary schools (five public and five private). Participants represented different subject areas and both genders to ensure varied perspectives. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved (Patton, 2015).

Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide based on the study objectives and relevant literature. The guide covered four areas:

- Teachers' understanding of continuous assessment;
- Experiences in implementing continuous assessment;
- Challenges encountered; and
- Suggestions for improvement.

The semi-structured format allowed participants to express their views freely while ensuring alignment with the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.

Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement and member checking.

Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the study context and procedures.

Dependability was achieved through an audit trail documenting all stages of the research.

Confirmability was promoted by maintaining reflexive notes and grounding interpretations in participants' responses.

Procedure for Data Collection

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the selected school principals. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Individual interviews were conducted within the school premises and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, while field notes were taken to capture non-verbal and contextual information.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles governing educational research were strictly observed. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained using pseudonyms, while all collected data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Method of Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved six stages: familiarisation with the data, coding, development of categories and themes, review of themes, naming and defining themes, and interpretation of findings in relation to research questions and relevant literature.

Four major themes emerged from the analysis, corresponding to the study objectives: teachers' understanding of continuous assessment, implementation experiences, implementation challenges, and strategies for improving continuous assessment practices.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the interview data produced four major themes: teachers' understanding of continuous assessment (CA), implementation practices, challenges encountered, and strategies for improvement. Representative quotations are included to illustrate participants' views.

Theme 1: Teachers' Understanding of Continuous Assessment

Most participants viewed CA as a continuous process of monitoring students' academic progress rather than relying solely on final examinations. They emphasized that it provides opportunities for regular feedback and helps identify learners' strengths and weaknesses.

One participant stated:

"Continuous assessment enables teachers to know students' progress throughout the term and not only during examinations."

However, a few teachers admitted that some colleagues still perceive CA mainly as periodic testing for record purposes, indicating variations in understanding.

Theme 2: Experiences in Implementing Continuous Assessment

Participants reported using various assessment methods, including class tests, assignments, projects, oral presentations, practical exercises, and classroom observations. Many noted that these methods promoted active learning and improved teacher–student interaction.

Nevertheless, implementation differed across schools. Private schools generally maintained more consistent assessment schedules, while public schools often experienced interruptions due to large class sizes and administrative demands.

Theme 3: Challenges Affecting Continuous Assessment

Teachers identified several barriers to effective implementation. The most frequently mentioned were:

Large class sizes.

Excessive workload.

Inadequate instructional materials.

Poor record-keeping facilities.

Insufficient training on assessment practices.

Limited time for marking and feedback.

A participant observed:

"Managing continuous assessment for over eighty students in one class is difficult and reduces the quality of feedback."

Many participants also expressed concern about inconsistent implementation and occasional external pressure to inflate students' scores.

Theme 4: Strategies for Improving Continuous Assessment

Participants suggested several measures for strengthening CA implementation, including:

Regular professional development for teachers.

Recruitment of more qualified teachers to reduce workload.

Provision of adequate assessment materials and digital record systems.

Stronger monitoring by educational authorities.

Clearer national guidelines and policies on continuous assessment.

According to one teacher:

"If teachers receive regular training and schools provide adequate facilities, continuous assessment will achieve its intended purpose."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that teachers generally understand the objectives of continuous assessment and acknowledge their importance in improving teaching and learning. This supports earlier studies which describe CA as an integral component of formative assessment that enhances students' achievement.

Despite this positive perception, effective implementation remains constrained by institutional and resource-related challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and heavy teacher workload. Similar challenges have been reported in previous Nigerian studies on educational assessment.

Participants' recommendations highlight the need for continuous teacher training, improved school resources, and stronger policy implementation. Addressing these issues would enhance the reliability, fairness, and educational value of continuous assessment in Nigerian secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

Teachers generally perceive continuous assessment as an effective strategy for monitoring students' learning and improving instructional practices. However, successful implementation is limited by inadequate resources, excessive workload, and insufficient professional support. Strengthening teacher capacity and improving institutional support are essential for maximizing the effectiveness of continuous assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments should provide regular professional development on continuous assessment.

More qualified teachers should be employed to reduce class size and workload.

Schools should provide adequate assessment and record-management facilities.

Educational authorities should strengthen supervision to ensure compliance with continuous assessment guidelines.

Digital assessment and record-keeping systems should be introduced to improve efficiency and accuracy.

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