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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# PRACTICES OF CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS' EFL READING SKILLS PERFORMANCE: TEN SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF ILUBABOR ZONE IN FOCUS

\*Seifu Zinab

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mettu University, Ethiopia

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### ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to explore the practice of continuous assessment strategies on students' EFL reading skills performance. It was conducted in ten Secondary Schools of Ilubabor Zone involving 500 students. The study was guided by the following basic research questions: First, what continuous assessment strategies were being practiced in Secondary Schools of Ilubabor Zone? Second, what is the relationship between the continuous assessment strategies practiced and students' performance in Secondary Schools in Ilubabor Zone? Qualitative descriptive survey research design is used to collect and analyze the data. The data was collected from students using questionnaires, focused group discussions, and observations to elicit opinion of the students. The information from the questionnaires was presented in figures and percentages in tables while information obtained from interviews and focused group discussions were analyzed using qualitative techniques. The findings of the study revealed that: 1) different continuous assessment strategies were being practiced in Secondary Schools. 2) The findings of the study also showed a positive relationship between some of the continuous assessment strategies practiced in EFL Reading Skills classroom and students' performance. Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that continuous assessment strategies positively contribute to performance of students' EFL Reading Skills. Finally, it was recommended that regulations and policies need to be put in place so that all schools can benefit from the practice and a uniform policy should be emphasized. What is more training for teachers should be encouraged especially in the practice of continuous assessment strategies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since the teaching and learning of languages started, scholars in the field have been striving to come up with appropriate and effective ways of teaching and learning both first and second as well as foreign languages. English is one of these foreign languages that are widely taught in schools around the world (Brewster, 1992). In Ethiopia, also the beginning of teaching and learning English as a foreign language dates back to the emergence of modern education in the country in 1940s. In those days, it was used as a medium of instruction starting from Grade Three and later on it has been used at high school level and above. Since then, English has been taught as one of the major subjects at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. It is also used as the medium of instruction in the levels mentioned. The new Ethiopian Education and Training Policy of 1994 states that English should be given as a subject starting from grade one onwards and the policy has also given due emphasis to the use of English as a medium of instruction in the secondary and the tertiary levels.

\*Corresponding Author: Seifu Zinab,  
Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mettu University, Ethiopia.

To this end, the practice of the English language skills is indispensably much important in language education. In addition, in striving to assure quality education, emphasis on language assessment is also crucial. The core purpose of assessment in teaching-learning is to collect information about the learners' progress. The exact status of learners' achievement might be obtained by assessing the learning progress continuously. Thus, the use of Continuous Assessment (CA) helps to realize that all students make learning progress throughout the school or education thereby increasing their academic achievement. Likewise, as to our country's Education and Training Policy (ETP) due attention has been given to CA in that "CA in academic and practical subjects, including aptitude tests will be conducted to ascertain the formation of all rounded profile of students at all levels"(MOE, 1994). Like in any other subjects, teacher's use of CA methods in EFL reading classroom enables them to realize how the learners are progressing in the development of skills, knowledge and values. Thus, investigating the practice of continuous assessment strategies in EFL reading classrooms needs great emphasis since assessing the students' English language skills is regarded all over the English-speaking world as one of the most important ways of monitoring educational

standards (Harrison and Salinger, 1998). Therefore, EFL teachers are required to put this sort of assessment into practice. This study is, therefore, intended to analyze the practice of continuous assessment on students' EFL reading skills performance and to find out if there is any relationship between Continuous Assessment and students' performance on acquisition of EFL reading skills and knowledge in Ten Secondary Schools of Ilubabor Zone.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is believed that continuous assessment is being implemented with the intention of improving learning and guiding teaching in particular and raising the standard of education in general. For this reason, Continuous Assessment is broadly under the system of any school level of our country to realize the fact that underpinned these concepts. The major reason that initiated the researcher to focus on the practice of Continuous Assessment Strategies on students' EFL reading skills performance is that CA is exceedingly recommended to support learners' academic performance and to inform teachers' instructions. There is significant evidence on literature to prove that effective use of CA enhances learners' performance and improves the standards (Taras, 2009). The majority of education institutions around the world have adapted the use of CA to support learners' learning and guide teachers' instructions. In addition, what encouraged the researcher to conduct a research on this topic is the researcher has more than twelve years of teaching experiences at different grade levels of schools, especially, in high schools up to the university. What is more, CA is considered as tests given at different intervals, mid-term exam and final exam. Above all, students are expected to learn cooperatively; however, when an assignment or group work is given to them, only the representatives of the group accomplish the activities and the other students simply get the mark without their contribution. Also students who do not succeed in CA are not given appropriate remedial solution for their failure rather only they are provided with re-exam. These encouraged the researcher to investigate the practices of CA Strategies on students' academic performance in high school Grade Ten EFL reading classrooms. In line with this, the relationship between CA strategies being practiced and students' performance on acquisition of EFL reading skills and knowledge needs to be considered. Various studies have been carried out on issues related to CA in language learning and teaching in different institutions from the lower to the higher one. Consequently, they came up with a variety of recommendations in line with varied problems of the institutions. For instance, a research conducted by (Sileshi 2007, as cited in Yidnekachew, 2014) was limited only to the execution of CA in Debub Ethiopia Teacher Education College. According to his finding, teachers in Debub Ethiopia Teachers Education College had unfavorable perception about CA. Mbea (2008) carried out a study on the challenges of continuous oral assessment in EFL classes of Debrebirhan Teachers' College, and revealed that there was positive attitude towards continuous oral assessment even though it is neglected. Besides, different factors that hinder its implementation were identified. In connection with this, Yidnekachew's (2014), investigation of Grade Nine English language teachers' awareness and practices of continuous assessment in reading classes of Abdi Bori and Gore High Schools results also indicated that teachers' understanding of the principles and purposes of CA were inadequate; and there was a gap in the implementation of CA

in their reading classes properly. What makes this study unique from the other is more attention is given to fill the gap in relation to the strategy practice of CA on students' academic performance of ten government secondary school EFL reading classrooms in Ilubabor Zone. This is partly because almost all the above discussed and other local researchers gave more attention for colleges and universities. Furthermore, secondary school students need a great support for the rest of their academic career not only for English but also for the other subjects since the target language is the medium of instruction for all subjects taught in Ethiopia.

### **Objective of the Study**

#### **General Objective**

The main objective of this study is to assess the practices of CA strategies in relation to students' EFL reading skills performance in 10 government secondary schools of Ilubabor Zone.

#### **Specific Objectives of the Study**

1. To identify students' perception about the practices of CA strategies regarding their EFL reading skills performance.
2. To identify how students practice EFL reading skills.
3. To identify whether there is significant relationship between continuous assessment strategies being practiced and students' EFL reading skills performance.

### **Basic Research Questions**

1. How do students perceive the practice of CA strategies in relation to their EFL Reading Skills' performance?
2. How do students practice CA strategies in their EFL reading skills classroom?
3. Is there any significant relationship between CA strategies being practiced in EFL reading skills and students' performance?

### **The Research Design**

In this study, the researcher employed a descriptive survey design which involves both quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis. This research design was used because it is very important to illustrate the existing situation in terms of the continuous assessment being practiced and their effects on students' EFL reading skills performance. Descriptive survey study is also appropriate to study an issue based on a representative samples from a relatively large population. On the other hand, the possibility of using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods further makes it a suitable research design for this particular study.

### **Participants of the Study**

The Sources of data for the study were Grade 10 students of 10 secondary schools. Fifty students (50) from each participating schools were randomly selected to participate in the study. Therefore, a total population of 500 students was selected to participate in the study.

### **Sampling Technique**

From the total 38 secondary schools in Ilubabor zone, 10 high schools were selected using systematic random sampling

technique as respondents for the questionnaires since the researcher wanted to give equal chances for all the secondary schools found in Ilubabor Zone to participate in the study. In addition, focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted in all the 10 schools to triangulate the results of the data.

### Data Collection Instruments

**Questionnaires:** The questionnaire is one of the data gathering tools employed by the researchers for securing pertinent information for the study. It is used to collect relevant data from 500 Grade 10 students of the 10 high schools.

**Focus Group Discussion:** Face to face FGD was held with students of the 10 high schools. The FGD was used because of their advantages over questionnaires especially to allow the researcher to probe for particular responses, clarifications and confirmations of information from the respondents. FGD was one of the important research tool employed in order to get in-depth information from the respondents.

### Data Collection Procedures

The data collection was conducted according to the following procedures. First, questionnaire, and FGD guideline were prepared. Then, they were subjected to comments from colleagues for reliability and validity. Following this, the clarity of the contents of the questionnaire was checked in line with the objectives of the study, and the convenient time was negotiated with the subjects of the study. Finally, the administration of the questionnaire took place on the spot. Then FGD for the learners was conducted on the basis of lottery method random sampling basis.

### Methods of Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The responses of close ended items of the questionnaires was tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistical tools such as percentages, frequencies, mean values. However, the analysis of the data collected through FGD, and open-ended items of the questionnaires were analyzed using qualitative method of data analysis so as to substantiate the close-ended one.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The findings of this study are presented based on the research questions. These findings are based on 500 questionnaires collected from the students.

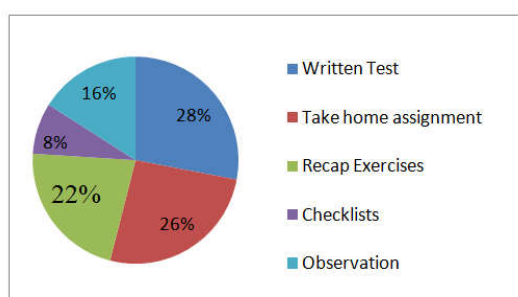


Figure 1. Students' responses on how teachers assessed their reading skills work daily

Figure 1 indicates that students' written tests, take-home assignments and recap exercises dominated the teachers' continuous assessment strategies practiced. Checklist was the less practiced strategy. The researcher found out that teachers had gained very little training in the use of checklists. This was more evidence by the failure of any teachers to present any form of checklist to the researchers. The findings in Table 1 illustrate that students were frequently given Recap Exercises while written tests and take-home assignments were less frequent. Checklists and observation were rarely used. Oral tests and questionnaires were never used according to students. The responses to when the teachers carried out the different continuous assessment strategies to assess students' works are summarized in Table 2 below. Table 2 shows that their teachers mainly used written tests, take-home assignments, and recap exercises. The three continuous assessment strategies are more practiced than the rest of the assessment strategies. Furthermore, oral tests and projects were not used by their teachers in EFL reading classes according to students' response and in fact none of them responded about oral tests and projects.

### Research Question 2: The relationship between CA strategies and students' performance

The findings of the students' responses about this question are presented in Table 3 below.

From Table 3, it was clearly observed that majority of the students felt that CA practice contributed to their good performance. CA practice helped them to revise more effectively and to also gain confidence and become ready for the final examinations. Many students also indicated that when their teachers gave them quick feedback, they were able to identify their weaknesses, and therefore, they made efforts to improve. It was very clear from the findings that CA strategies practice in EFL Reading classes arouses students desire to pay attention and concentrate because they were expecting to be assessed most of the time. The following findings were discovered on how different CA strategies are related to students' performance. Further analysis of the relationship between continuous assessment strategies (take-home assignment, recap exercises, written tests, and projects) and students' performance in Ilubabor Zone Secondary Schools is presented in the figures below.

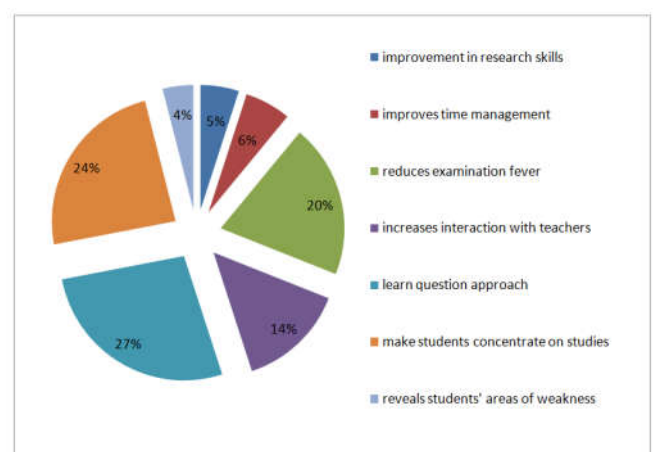


Figure 2. Students' response on how CA strategies related to their performance

**Table 1. Students' responses on the times their teachers used different CA strategies**

Items	Very Often	Often	Not Often	Never	Total Responses	Total Sample
Oral Tests	0	0	0	0	0	500
Written Tests	221	233	46	0	500	500
Take-home assignments	215	227	60	8	500	500
Projects	0	0	0	0	0	500
Recap Exercises	317	105	78	0	500	500
Checklists	0	22	37	109	168	500
Observation	53	104	61	60	278	500
Questionnaire	0	0	0	0	0	500

**Table 2. Students' responses on when their teachers used different CA strategies**

Items	Daily	Weekly	Fortnight	Monthly	Half-semester	Per-Semester	Total
Oral Tests	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Written Tests	35	210	34	170	35	16	500
Take-home assignments	267	130	42	31	30	0	500
Projects	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Recap Exercises	303	115	40	21	21	0	500
Checklists	35	38	47	0	55	65	240
Observation	83	38	45	50	55	80	351

**Table 3. Students' responses on the relationship of CA Strategies to their performance**

Contributions	SA	A	DA	SD	Total Resp.	Total Sample
Help me to revise	243	257	0	0	500	500
I become more confident and ready for final exams	293	207	0	0	500	500
Teacher gives me quick feedback	341	147	0	0	478	500
Improves my understanding	257	243	0	0	500	500
I learn answering techniques and question approach	312	174	0	0	486	500
Helps to master the notes	245	230	9	0	484	500
Arouses my desire to attention and concentrate in class	227	238	32	0	497	500
Helps me interact with the teacher	263	237	0	0	500	500

Figure 2 shows that CA practice equipped the students with the skill and knowledge of question approach and answer techniques. Students also responded that, the practice of CA made them concentrate on their studies. This was because they were expectant of a test, an assignment or a Recap Exercise. Students, therefore, devoted most of their time on revising their books. Students also agreed that CA reduced the examination fears and increased their interaction with the teachers. To sum up, the data analyzed finally revealed that there were different CA strategies being practiced in EFL reading classes in schools that included: written tests, recap exercises, take home assignments, presentations, observations, and checklists. Students all agreed that CA strategies contributed to their performance.

## DISCUSSION

The study revealed that a variety of CA strategies were being practiced in Ilubabor Zone secondary schools. Among these, written tests (i.e. teacher made tests) and take-home assignments were the most commonly practiced strategies of CA in EFL Reading Skills classes. The study discovered that observation and checklists were other continuous assessment strategies practiced by Ilubabor Zone Secondary School teachers. According to the students, teachers awarded them marks by observing what they were doing through demonstrations, role-plays, presentations, recitations and modeling in EFL reading classes. For students, the results from these observations helped them to change their way of acting and presenting information which always improved their performance. However, the effort of the researcher to get any example of the checklist is in vain. Therefore, the researcher wondered whether the students differentiated the marking guide from the checklist or not.

Continuous assessment requires the use of a diverse set of data for a purpose. That purpose is the modification of the learning work to adapt to the need that is revealed by the feedback from the student. The reaction of teachers to students' feedback range from the immediate classroom objectives, lesson plan and the teaching, through to a comprehensive review of a variety of appropriate continuous assessment strategy in order to appraise progress over a whole topic or theme covered.

### The relationship between CA strategies being used and students EFL Reading Skills performance

The findings obtained through the use of questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussions with students revealed a lot of important insights. The most important insights and discussions are presented below. According to this study, the findings implied that CA provided a framework in which classroom objectives were set and students' progress chartered and expressed. When questions were asked, whether take-home assignments, recap-exercises, and written tests facilitated development of high order thinking, the research found out that 81.8 percent of students agreed that they learnt answering techniques and question approaches through CA. Students explained that when words like explain, identify, describe, state, compare and contrast, to what extent, were used in continuous assessment strategies, they got familiar with their interpretation. They argued that they learnt how to approach a question with such terms, how to organize their answers which helped them to perform better when they sat for an exam. In this study, however, the research found out through a focused discussion with students that some teachers behave differently towards boys and girls and towards pupils from the different social classes. In each of these cases, students complained that some teachers would rate a particular

piece of work more highly if it came from one type of student rather than the other. The researcher suggests use of checklists whenever observation is done. Checklists can be used to record the presence or absence of knowledge, particular skills, learning process, or attitudes. They may be used to record such information in relation to written assignments, presentations, classroom performances, and test-taking behaviors. To the researcher, this meant that continuous assessment is what actually happens in the classroom and what teachers and students do to measure how much learning is taking place. It was found out that in continuous assessment, learners are not objects to be acted upon/ assessed. They have a clear voice in the way that the continuous assessment sessions evolve. All in all, this study found out that, if properly, professionally and honestly carried out, CA strategies practice has a great positive potential relationship with the students' performance.

### Conclusion

Drawing on students' perceptions, there were many continuous assessment strategies practiced and these were found to have a positive relationship to students' performance in the final examinations. Good application of CA using different strategies would help in moving towards accomplishing learning objectives and restoring greater confidence in the class and school systems. Enhanced performance of students would culminate in the reduction of the incidences of examination malpractices, as students would have been well prepared for the certificates examinations through CA. However, the contribution should not only be looked at as improving student performance but also as determining students' current level of knowledge, skills, or understanding of content.

### Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should put in place regulations, checks and balances to ensure that different CA strategies are used both in government funded and privately owned schools. A uniform policy on this practice should be emphasized so that all schools benefit from it.
2. Higher institutions of learning should train teachers on how to practice CA strategies for their implementation in secondary schools. It was found out through the interviews and focused group discussions that students complained of the many problems they have faced when their teachers attempted to implement Continuous Assessments. Therefore the training should focus on how teachers can carry out continuous assessment in the different teaching and learning institutions with ease.

3. Given the complexity of classroom assessment and evidence relating to EFL teachers' skills and practice in this area, there is an obvious need for development of an infrastructure to support improvement of its quality. Therefore, regular training seminars/workshops should be constantly organized for teachers to update their knowledge of the process involved in the implementation of continuous assessment to further boost the realization of learning objectives.
4. There is a need for this research to be carried out in depth in other districts so as to compare and test how general the research findings of this study can be made.

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