

Perceived Role of Continuous Assessments on Secondary School Students' Academic Performance in Mbeya, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of continuous assessments on secondary school students' academic performance in Mbeya, Tanzania, using the cross-sectional design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions from 90 students, 12 teachers and three Ward Education Officers. The findings show that continuous assessments enable students to discover their weaknesses and strengths, enhance their reasoning capacity, helps them to perform better in their examinations and motivate them to spend adequate time studying. The study recommends that teachers should incorporate diverse and frequent assessments to determine students' progress. This will promote students' effective studying at school and at home environments and improve their academic performance. Teachers should provide timely and specific feedback before the next assessment or examination. Finally, Learners should get engaged in the assessment process, which is an effective way of improving their academic performance.

Keywords: Regular continuous assessment; academic performance; tests; assignments.

How to cite: Tweve, C. S. (2025). Perceived Role of Continuous Assessments on Secondary School Students' Academic Performance in Mbeya, Tanzania. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 6(4), 95-101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2025v06i04.0459>.

Introduction

Continuous assessment is a formative evaluation procedure concerned with finding out, in a systematic manner, the over-all gains that a student has made in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills after a given set of learning experience (Ankeli et al., 2022). Continuous assessments are recognized as critical tools for enhancing student engagement in learning and improving academic outcomes (NECTA, 2021). Research has shown that continuous assessment motivates students to persist in studies, address weaknesses and influences interactions with teachers. Most importantly, continuous assessment provides students with actionable feedback, which influences their learning processes (Amani et al., 2021).

History of continuous assessment can be traced back to 1976 when it was implemented

for the first time after the Musoma Resolution (Mgejwa, 2023). This resolution emphasized the necessity of getting rid of "ambush" type examinations and reducing the excessive emphasis placed on written examinations. Thus, the main purpose of having the continuous assessment scheme as an integral component of assessment procedures in the Tanzanian education system was to eliminate or minimize the element of performance risks associated with a single examination and to give a valid indication of students' achievement (Nziku & Matogwa, 2021). Before 1976, there was no formal or standardized system of continuous assessment; evaluation relied more on final examinations, leading to a lack of consistent standards across different schools and subjects. Teachers often lacked the training in assessment principles, which made evaluating students difficult and resulted in little

correlation between marks awarded to students in different schools. The shift toward formal continuous assessment was largely a response to the Musoma Resolution of 1974. The resolution sought to move away from the colonial-era, exam-focused system toward one that promoted self-reliance and lifelong learning (Kahembe & Jackson, 2020).

The operationalization of the continuous assessment procedures in Tanzania came official in 1995 after the establishment of the Tanzania National Education and Training Policy (ETP), which stipulated that continuous assessment score shall contribute to 50% of the total weighting of the student's final examination results. This means that the total marks (100%) for the final examination shall include 50% marks from CA and 50% marks from the final examination (Mkimbili & Kitita, 2020). Before the establishment of the Tanzania National Education and Training Policy (ETP) in Tanzania in 1995, continuous assessment was primarily a summative evaluation, using final examinations at the end of a school term or year to grade students. While there was a guideline for continuous assessment in 1991, its implementation was often challenged by lack of teacher capacity, focus on pen-and-paper examinations and issues with uniformity and integrity, making its operationalization different from the intended continuous assessment for competence development. The 1995 ETP aimed at shifting the focus. However, challenges with implementation persisted (Kahembe & Jackson, 2020).

Measuring academic performance can occur at multiple levels and serves multiple purposes. For example, classroom teachers often conduct formative and summative tests to evaluate students' mastery of course content and provide grades for students. In Tanzania, continuous assessments are designed primarily to measure the students' academic progress at a school. In particular, continuous assessments are used to determine whether a student has mastered the minimum content and competencies required to receive at a particular class level or not (Ali & Mjenda, 2024). Teachers assess learning through written tests, homework exercises, oral presentations, question-and-answer sessions, science projects and artwork of various sorts (Mkisi & Maro, 2024).

Continuous assessments have various purposes, including encouraging and directing learning, providing feedback to students on their performances, providing feedback on teaching and/or the curriculum and ensuring that standards of progression are met. Learner assessment is best conceived as a form of two-way communication in which feedback on the educational process or product is provided to parents, teachers and education administrators (Nziku & Matogwa, 2021). Teachers are insisted to use reliable assessment approaches, such as portfolios, classroom or field observation, projects, oral presentations, self-assessment, interviews and peer assessment (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). The provision of regular continuous assessment provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate the competencies they have mastered in their classroom or learning environment (Tarmo, 2022).

The Tanzanian education curriculum emphasizes the use of portfolio, self-assessment, project work and problem-solving tasks as part of its shift towards a Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC). However, the actual implementation of these strategies in schools still faces significant challenges (Mgejwa, 2023). Nevertheless, assessment in Tanzanian secondary schools is far away from developing competence among secondary school students (Mushi et al., 2025). The key challenges for not developing competence include lack of teacher training and awareness of competence-based assessment methods, insufficient resources, large class sizes and a curriculum structure that favors memorization over application.

In most cases, teachers concentrate on ensuring coverage of the content of the curriculum as well as teaching students to answer national examination past paper questions (Nkya et al., 2021). Most of the teachers assess students' performance four times per year as required by school regulations and not during instruction (NECTA, 2021). Teachers normally give students mid-term tests in April and September, terminal examinations in June and annual examinations in November, at the end of the academic year (Amani et al., 2021). These kinds of assessments are not linked to the teaching process; thus they sound summative in nature.

Consequently, feedback from assessment fails to improve learning (Tarmo, 2022). The failure undermines the primary purpose of feedback and hinders a student's motivation and academic growth. Even the tasks which students do in assessment, focus at lower levels of the cognitive domain (Faremi et al., 2023). This means that the overuse of lower-level tasks limits students' ability to demonstrate skills in critical thinking and problem-solving, which require a more balanced assessment. Sha'iskawa (2023) from Katsina state observed that assessment can take many forms, including, but not limited to, class assessments, benchmarking and interim assessments, teacher questioning, response cards and exit passes.

Various types of assessment that are practiced in class inform teachers and help students improve academically. Basing on the literature, different studies that were conducted in Tanzania focused on continuous assessment in general, leaving a gap on the role of regular continuous assessment on students' academic performance. Some of these studies were titled Teachers' feedback provision practices: a case of geography subject continuous assessment activities in Tanzanian secondary schools (Yotham & Ndabi, 2023) and Extensiveness of continuous assessment practice on improving students' academic performance in Monduli District Public Secondary Schools in Tanzania (Mesian et al., 2024). None of these studies assessed the role of regular continuous assessment on students' academic performance. It was therefore the purpose of this study to investigate the role of regular continuous assessment on students' academic performance among ordinary level students in government secondary schools in Tanzania by taking Mbeya city as a case.

Theoretical Framework

Classical Conditioning Theory by Ivan Pavlov (Xiong, 2024) guided this study. Pavlov performed an experiment on dogs and discovered that dogs learned to salivate in response to a bell. Many trials had been given in each of which the bell was sounded and food was simultaneously (slightly later) presented. In this study, it was thought that secondary school students would get good results whenever the teacher taught and students were exposed to multiple continuous assessment

activities. According to Pavlov, Conditioned Response (CR) was the response developed during training and Conditioned Stimulus (CS) was the stimulus, which included training/teaching activities intended to evoke the CR (i.e. good results). Unconditioned Response (UR) was the same or almost the same response as the CR but it existed prior to training, normally being given whenever a certain stimulus, the Unconditioned Stimulus (US) was presented.

In this study, the Conditioned Response (CR) was the attainment of good results, which was evoked by the Conditioned Stimulus (CS), which was regular continuous assessment and Unconditioned Stimulus was the teaching and learning process. To Pavlov, pairing food and sound of the bell made the dog salivate. In this study, pairing of teaching and regular continuous assessment activities could make students perform better in terms of good results. The theory of Pavlov was considered important in this study in helping readers to understand the relationship between regular continuous assessment activities being used (i.e. assignments, teacher-made tests, recap exercises and projects) as the stimuli and academic performance of students.

Methodology

This section presents the methodology that guided this study.

Design

The study employed the mixed approach, through the cross-sectional design to explore the role of continuous assessments on students' academic performance.

Population and Sampling

The population included 205 form four students from Isyesye secondary school, Itezi secondary school and Uyole day secondary school, in Mbeya City. The study used simple random sampling under the Lamane's formula (Umar & Wachiko, 2021) to determine the sample of 90 students:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N\epsilon^2}$$

For qualitative data, the study purposely sampled 12 teachers, three Ward Education officers and six students from each of the three schools through convenience sampling procedures.

Sources of Data

The study used a questionnaire, a semi structured interview schedule and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as sources of data.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity, teachers from one secondary school within the study territory reviewed the research instruments as experts of continuous assessment. Additionally, member checks were conducted with participants to confirm the accuracy of recorded data and its interpretation. Reliability was strengthened through the methodological triangulation of data. Double-coding process was employed, where two independent observers reviewed and cross-verified the coding and thematic interpretations. These procedures helped minimize potential bias and enhanced the consistency of the findings.

Statistical Treatment of Data

Quantitative data involved descriptive statistics in terms of frequencies and percentage. Analysis of the qualitative data involved the thematic approach, whereby the study merged similar findings to answer the research question.

Ethical Considerations

Research clearance for data collection was obtained from the Directorate of the Post graduate Studies of the Catholic University of

Mbeya. The obtained research clearance was presented to the Mbeya Regional Administrative Secretary, who communicated with the District Administrative Secretary, where the study was conducted. Ward Education officers, Teachers and students were informed about the intention of the study and were also requested to get involve in the study. The study ensured confidentiality and informed consent, especially when dealing with sensitive data. Data was used solely for the intended research purpose.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on the role of regular continuous assessment on students' academic performance among ordinary level secondary school students.

Research Question: What are the roles of regular continuous assessments on students' academic performance among ordinary-level students?

The study sought to examine the roles of regular continuous assessments on students' academic performance among ordinary-level secondary school students. During data collection, students were required to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with various concepts on the role of regular continuous assessment on students' academic performance.

Data from Table 2 indicates that all students agreed that regular continuous assessments help them to discover their weaknesses and strengths in various subjects.

Table 2: Students' Responses on the Role of Regular Continuous Assessment

Item in the Questionnaire	Agree		Disagree	
	f	%	f	%
Continuous Assessment.....				
Enables students to discover their weaknesses and strengths	90	100	0	0
Enables students to study hard	90	100	0	0
Enables students to revise what has been taught by teachers in class	90	100	0	0
Measures students' understanding of what has been taught in the class	90	100	0	0
Enhances the reasoning capacity of students	90	100	0	0
Influences students to spend much time studying	90	100	0	0
Enables students to perform well in the final examinations	90	100	0	0
Enables students to perform better during the examination period	90	100	0	0
Influences students to read notes given by subject teachers	90	100	0	0

Similar findings were obtained from interviews with Ward Education Officers and teachers, as they reported that regular continuous assessments reveal the learners' area of weaknesses and strengths in particular

subjects, encouraging them to work towards correcting weak areas in academic subjects. One interviewee reported, "Regular continuous assessment encourages teachers to implement the designed instruction objectives as well as to

diagnose strength and weaknesses of individual students and apply corrective actions when a lack of progress is observed.”

Furthermore, some teachers and ward education officers reported through the interviews that although regular continuous assessments help in discovering strengths and weaknesses on students’ academic performance in various subjects, lack of teaching and learning facilities/materials affects the construction of good continuous assessments instruments (tests and homework). It was further reported that few text books are used as references for test construction, therefore making them repeat the same questions several times. One interviewee reported, “Our schools don’t have enough textbooks. which could help us in preparations for standard tests, home works and other examinations. We just copy questions from past papers prepared by other teachers from different schools.”

Similar findings were given by students during a FGD session. Six students, who were asked about the role of regular continuous assessments on their academic performance, reported that continuous assessments help them to discover their areas of strengths and weaknesses in different academic subjects. This implies that they acknowledged the role of regular continuous assessment on their academic performance. One of the participants during the FGD reported, “Regular continuous assessments provide information on weaknesses and achievements of particular levels of skills, understanding and knowledge, rather than the achievement of certain marks or score.”

The finding is similar to the Classical Conditioning Theory by Ivan Pavlov (1929-1936), which suggests that pairing of regular continuous assessment activities could help students reduce their weaknesses in various subjects and perform better in terms of scoring good grades in the final examinations. Therefore, classroom assessment is seen as helpful because it gives more immediate measures of solving students’ areas of weaknesses in different subjects and it guides and improves instruction (Bitew, 2022). The findings concur with the Classical Conditioning Theory, which shows that the more students

are given assignments and tests, the more they become competent. The finding concurs with that of Sha’iskawa (2023), which indicated that regular continuous assessments enable students to reduce their weaknesses in different subjects.

All students agreed with the statement that continuous assessments help them to spend much of their time studying. Similar findings were obtained from interviews with Ward Education Officers and teachers as they reported that continuous assessment help in making students spent well their time as it makes them busy because of assignments while in class and outside the classrooms. One interviewee reported, “Regular continuous assessments make students use much of their time in studying while at school and at home environments; therefore it helps them to improving their academic competence and avoid bad behaviors in their communities.” Furthermore, during FGDs, students indicated that the regular continuous assessments help them to be busy and spent well their time while in class and outside the classroom. One interviewee reported, “Continuous assessments is a controlling factor for students to use well their time while at school and at home, preventing them from bad behaviors. Some students may indulge in illegal matters due to missing assignments to do.”

These findings concur with those of Nziku and Matogwa (2021), who reported that teachers emphasized the use of authentic assessment methods, such as portfolios, classroom or field observations, projects, oral presentations, self-assessments, interviews and peer assessment, in making sure that students spend their time well.

All students agreed with the view that regular continuous assessments help them to perform better in their final examinations. The interviews with teachers also revealed similar findings. One among of the teachers during an interview reported, “Continuous assessment encourages students to study hard and improve their understanding and performance at school level and therefore, performing better in their final examination.” Similar findings were given by students during FGDs as they reported that frequent tests help them perform better in the final examinations. Furthermore, they reported that one other important roles of frequent home

works is that it creates extrinsic motivation; since students want to obtain good results in the course, they try hard and spend a lot of time in their preparation with an intention of performing better in the final examinations. According to Mkisi and Maro (2024), teachers who provides exercises after the lesson makes learners active and and students in turn try their best to do such exercises for better final examination results. The findings are similar to that of Hassan and Sotonade (2022), who reported that parents believed that homework may aid their children's school achievements in final examinations.

All students agreed with the statement that continuous assessment enhances reasoning capacity. Similarly, during an interview with teachers and Ward Education Officers, it was reported that continuous assessment strengthens reasoning capacity as when students are tasked to perform different activities, such as quiz and assignments, their reasoning capacity increases. Similarly, during a FGD with some students, it was revealed that continuous assessments increases reasoning capacity. They further uncovered that they use summary notes provided by teachers to explore and come up with complete ideas regarding what was asked by their teachers, thus expanding their reasoning capacity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide valuable insights on the perceived roles of continuous assessment toward students' academic performance. It shows that through providing regular continuous assessments, such as assignments, quizzes and tests, increases students' reasoning capacity and encourages students to improve their weak areas, which improves their academic performance.

Recommendations

The study recommends that teachers should incorporate diverse and frequent assessments, such as quizzes, assignments and practical tasks to establish a comprehensive view of students' progress. The assessments will make students study effectively, which will improve their academic performance. Secondly, teachers should provide timely and specific feedback. They need to offer feedback that is prompt, clear and actionable so that students can use it to do corrections before the next

assessment or examination. Finally, Learners need to get involved in the assessment process, which will improve their academic performance.

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