

**ORIGINAL****The Implementation of Continuous Assessment in Writing Classes the of Jimma College of Teachers Education**

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*Abstract*

*The main objective of this study was to assess the implementation of continuous assessment in Jimma College of Teachers Education EFL writing classes. More specifically, it was intended to assess the extent to which the techniques, grading frame of reference, frequency and types of feedback provisions were being implemented in the College. It was also intended to identify the possible challenges that may hinder the process. To conduct the study, a mixed method design was employed. The data were collected from 40 student-teachers and 10 EFL teacher-educators of the college through questionnaire, interview and classroom observation. The findings of the study revealed that continuous assessment activities were being practiced. Nevertheless, it was found that there are a lot of gaps the research participants are required to fill: almost only quantitative type of feedback is provided even within unfair time interval; there is high influence of the summative tests over variety of assessment procedures; almost only norm-referenced grading frame of reference, which is the typical nature of summative tests was used to grade students' performance. Finally, the study concludes by suggesting ways in which these gaps can be filled.*

**Key words:** Continuous assessment, Formative assessment, Summative assessment, Feedback, Assessment techniques

**INTRODUCTION**

According to Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) (Ministry of Education, 2003), continuous assessment creates a

natural environment for measuring the students' language learning progress, identifying gaps and suggesting instructional solutions and evaluating course effectiveness.

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It is an assessment done formally and informally on a regular and continuous basis by integrating it with instruction. The learners, therefore, obtain scores from a set of continuous assessment activities and the average of these scores are likely to be more reliable than those obtained from mere formal tests administered at the end of certain course.

Some scholars classify continuous assessment as ‘formative continuous assessment’ and ‘summative continuous assessment’ (Brindely, 2001; Greenstein, 2010; Lubanga, 2010). Formative assessment provides teachers with natural environments in assessing writing skills since it is basically a vital part of the teaching-learning process and hence it creates good opportunity to provide immediate feedback on students’ written work (Brown, 2004). According to this author, summative assessment can also continuously be used if the teacher plans the assessment activity and makes clear to students its objectives and assessment criteria in advance.

In general, continuous assessment is a means by which teachers successively monitor and evaluate students’ language learning, progress and abilities during each lesson and/or at the end of a course. This enables them to identify how much students know about language, to what extent they perform language tasks efficiently, and how much skills they have developed for further learning. Such evidence can be gathered through a variety of instruments in an extended period of time. Based on these pieces of evidence, teachers make judgments on students’ performances and give them feedbacks on their strengths and weaknesses as well as give them needed support and guidance (Greenstein, 2010). Since continuous assessment has such advantages in the teaching and learning process, the new

national assessment policy of Ethiopia places more emphasis on continuous assessment. One of the manifestations is that it counts as much as 75% of the total assessment activities (Ministry of Education, TESO, 2003).

In Jimma College of Teachers’ Education, which is one of the ten colleges of teachers’ education in Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia, continuous assessment is accounted for 60% out of the total assessment system. The College is currently running a three-year-cluster modality of diploma program. English courses are being taught to students who have successfully completed grade 10 and met the minimum requirements to join the three-year training. Since the 2010 academic year, the student-teachers joining the language stream are organized as “English-focused” and “Afan Oromo-focused” groups. After completing the programme, the former is expected to teach English as a foreign language in the first cycle (Grades 1-4).

All English major student-teachers take different writing courses. The “Communicative English Skills” (Part I and part II) are organized around the four major language skills. So, writing skills are being developed as one part of the other skills. Besides, they take “Basic English Writing Skills” as an independent course. These courses are all given in the first-year, first and second semesters of the total three-year program, according to the course breakdown and description sent from the Ministry of Education to each of the training college.

In the context of the college, most of the assessment of student-teachers’ language performance in the college is done through continuous assessment procedures. The college has been practicing the procedures for more than eight years. Therefore, the teacher-educators are expected to find ways

of helping the student- teachers with their learning difficulties through using a variety of continuous assessment techniques such as question and answer, peer and self-assessment, observation, administering quizzes, assignments, class work, etc. and administering formal tests such as mid-exams. Moreover, teacher educators are expected to continuously provide the student-teachers with written-descriptive feedback timely on their written work so that the trainees will check their learning progress.

Although continuous assessment has been practiced in the College, the researchers' experience and practical observation in the college shows that administrators of the college, teacher-educators and the students seem to have put doubt on the effectiveness of this procedure. This is because the students were found to be deficient in their writing skills; the texts (i.e. essays, paragraphs, and summaries) composed by the students were found to exhibit inadequate content, disorganization, lack of focus and use of incoherent sentences with serious spelling and syntax errors.

Regarding different aspects of assessing writing skills, the study carried out by Parr and Timperley (2010) showed that feedback provision to formative writing assessment that includes written feedback on drafts of students' texts and conducting conferences with individual students were found to be a significant part of instruction. The written responses given to the texts produced by the students were in line with the framework of assessment for learning. Within this framework, quality of feedback was defined in terms of providing information about where students were positioned in relation to the performance desired, key features of the desired performance and what was needed to achieve the desired performance. Finally, they suggested that considerable teacher

pedagogical content-knowledge is required to provide such feedback.

The present study focuses on assessing the extent to which the techniques of continuous assessment are being implemented in English Language writing classes. To achieve the objective of the study, the research attempts to address the following questions:

1. Is a consistent, timely and descriptive feedback provision practiced in English writing classes by teacher- educators and student-teachers of the college?
2. How often do the teacher-educators and student-teachers implement the techniques of continuous assessment in writing classes?
3. What are the challenges of continuous assessment in writing classes?
4. Does the grading frame of reference-work match with the principles of the continuous assessment?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

In this research, a descriptive survey research design involving both qualitative and quantitative techniques was employed.

### **Study population and sampling techniques**

The study population includes 10 EFL teachers and 40 first year EFL students of Jimma College of Teachers' Education in 2011/12 academic year. Jimma College of Teachers' Education, which is one of the colleges of teachers' education in Oromia Regional State, was selected as the site of the study based on purposive sampling procedure. This college is currently running

a three-year-cluster modality of diploma program. English courses are being taught to students who have successfully completed grade 10 and met the minimum requirements to join the three-year training. Since the 2010 academic year, the student-teachers joining the language stream are organized as “English-focused” and “Afan Oromo-focused” groups. After completing the programme, the former group is expected to teach English as a foreign language in primary school first cycle.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

In order to collect the data for the research, questionnaires, interview and classroom observation were used. Of these instruments the questionnaire was used as the main data collection tool. Before using them, each instrument was examined by three experts to establish its validity.

### **Questionnaire**

Five points Likert scale questionnaire of 43 close-ended items and five open-ended questions was distributed to the total EFL teacher-educators while questionnaire of 26 close ended and four open-ended items was administered to student-teachers. The later was translated into their mother tongue, in order to make the burden of responding easier. The close-ended items of the questionnaire were used to collect the data on different areas of the research while the open-ended items of the questionnaire were used to get detailed data from the teacher educators and the student-teachers on whether they have any other factors they know that may affect the implementation of continuous assessment.

### **Interview**

Semi-structured interview, having similar contents with the questionnaire to crosscheck the responses drawn through the questionnaire was prepared based on the objectives of the study and the review of related literature. It was believed that

such an interview would be appropriate to permit greater depth of response which cannot be obtained through any other data gathering tools. Seven guiding questions and prompts were set to interview the English teacher-educators who were teaching writing skills.

### **Observation**

Classroom observation as a substantiating tool was also used because observational data help the researchers to see directly what people do without having to rely on what they say they do (Dornyei, 2007). To make the observation, a structured observation checklist was prepared but each event of the process was described qualitatively. Six of the ten interviewed teachers were observed in order to check whether what they responded to the questionnaires and interview questions match what they actually do in the class. They were selected on the basis of their relative experience in teaching English as a foreign language. The observation focused on the class size, frequency of feedback provision and continuous assessment (CA) plans. Each teacher was observed for three rounds, each round for 50 minutes.

### **Data Organization and Analysis**

First, the data on the number of returns and non-returns of the close questionnaires was presented in a table form with special attention to number of respondents and non-respondents. Secondly, the mean values and percentages were calculated to analyze the raw data to see whether there was real practice of CA in writing classes. It was supposed that the mean value above 3 indicates that the subjects have adequately identified the challenges encountered in the process and that the mean value below 3 indicates that the respondents confirm the stated challenges have less or no impact in applying the

process. Still, if it is exactly 3, this may indicate uncertainty about the impact each factor has on the process. Thirdly, percentage was used to see the extent to which the teacher-respondents apply the CA methods. Finally, items of the close-ended questionnaire relating to the same topic heading were set consecutively from the very beginning to contrast the responses of different respondents on a given issue. Similarly, the raw data collected through the interview was tape recorded and the transcripts were re-read in order to have a full understanding of the issue. Some of the responses were quoted since the direct quotation serves as the basis for analysis in qualitative research (Patton, 1990).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Students' continuous assessment practice**

Tables (1-5) show the responses given by the students to items about four major areas of the research: the feedback provision, CA techniques applied, the teachers' teaching loads and frame of reference used to grade students' written work.

### **Feedback**

Feedback is believed to be one of the most important techniques that can accelerate students' learning, for it provides motivation for the students if it is done properly and timely. To assess the feedback practice in the college, data were collected from the students and the results are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Students' Response to Frequency of Feedback Provision

T=Total; M= Mean Value

FA=Formative Assessment

Items	Always		Usually		S/times		Rarely		Never		T	M
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
FA feedback is given immediately	8	20	9	22.5	18	45	3	7.5	2	5	40	3.45
FA feedback is given timely enough	8	20	9	22.5	18	45	3	7.5	2	5	40	3.45
Written feedback is given in a few days.	5	12.5	8	20	16	40	9	22.5	2	5	40	3.12
Written feedback is given within minutes	2	5	9	22.5	9	22.5	13	32.5	7	17.5	40	2.65
Feedback is given at the end of a semester	4	10	5	12.5	10	25	8	20	13	32.5	40	2.47
The teacher does not give us any form of written feedback.	6	15	3	7.5	7	17.5	4	10	20	56	40	2.27

*SA= Summative Assessment**CA= Continuous Assessment*

The mean value of item 1.1 (M=3.45) in Table 1 shows that the teacher-educators provide the students with timely feedback on formative-writing-assessment activities. This enables learners to see their daily progress in developing their writing skills. Similarly, the mean value of item 1.2 (M=3.45) in the same table shows that the teacher-educators provide the students with timely feedback on formative-writing-assessment activities. This implies that the assessment procedures are part of the teaching-learning process. This finding does not seem to accurately reflect the situation in the college. This is because findings obtained through interview, open ended questionnaire and observation reveal that there are many challenges that hinder the effective utilization of FA.

In addition to this, the responses given to other items do not support the effective utilization of FA, for instance, the mean value of item 1.3 (M=3.12) in Table 1 above shows the occasional provision of written descriptive feedback to CA activities in a few days. Such type of feedback is provided as a response of SA procedures such as formally administered tests or mid exams. Nevertheless, the feedback on writing FA procedures should

be provided within minute's time interval (Angelo & Cross, 1993). The mean value of item 1.4 (M=2.65) shows that giving written feedback within minutes is done sometimes or rarely. This is against the principles of CA because feedback becomes productive if it is provided usually within minutes of completing a task (Irons, 2008).

The mean value of item 1.5 (M=2.47) in Table 1 shows that the teachers provide written feedback at the end of a semester is not regular sometimes. This seems convincing when we see the response of more than 52% of the respondents who reported that the provision of feedback at the end of a semester occurs rarely or never. On the other hand, still the response of more than 47% of the respondents indicates that the provision of feedback at the end of a semester is frequent. This also indicates the pressure of the influence of SA procedures in the assessment of writing in the college. The mean value of item 1.6 in Table 1 (M= 2.27) shows that the teachers provide written feedback on CA but it may not be sufficient enough and not descriptive type that tells learners their past, present or even future indicators of progress.

**The Applications of Continuous Assessment techniques from students' perspective**

**Table 2:** Students' Responses on application of CA techniques

Items	Always		Usually		S/times		Rarely		Never		T	M
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Formative activities are explained to students	8	20	12	30	13	32.5	3	7.5	4	10	40	3.42
FA techniques are used during teaching learning process.	4	10	6	15	17	42.5	10	25	3	7.5	40	2.95
FA techniques are used at the end of a unit	6	15	7	17.5	9	22.5	11	27.5	7	17.5	40	2.85
Formal tests are graded most frequently	7	17.5	10	25	8	20	10	25	5	12.5	40	3.10
Informal tests are graded most frequently	7	17.5	8	20	14	35	6	15	5	12.5	40	3.15
Informal tests are not graded mostly	2	5	10	25	7	17.5	12	30	9	22.5	40	2.60
FA activities are used as indicator of learning progress	6	15	12	30	12	30	8	20	2	5	40	3.30
Group work are followed by discussion	10	25	13	32.5	7	17.5	7	17.5	3	7.5	40	3.50
Informal tests dominate the formal tests	5	12.5	7	17.5	12	30	12	30	4	10	40	2.92

As observed from Table 2, item 2.1(M=3.42), the instructors discuss the objectives and the importance of each formative activity with the learners sometimes. But this practice should be carried out frequently. It helps the students realize why they are participating in an activity and what they are supposed to be learning (Wren, 2008). Still about 17.5% of the students reported that teachers do not have such practice.

The mean value of item 2.2 (M=2.95) of the same table shows the implementation of FA procedures, that is, the use of a variety of assessment techniques as a part of the classroom teaching learning process occurs only sometimes. This indicates a high dominating practice of SA over a variety of assessment forms.

Based on the mean values obtained from item 2.3 (M=2.85) in Table 2 responded by students and item 9.8 (M=3.10) in Table 9 and item 7.4 (M=3.10) in Table 7 responded by the teacher-educators and the data obtained through the classroom observation and the interview, it is possible to say that CA is practiced at the end of a unit, which is the typical tradition of the SA. Moreover, as noted in the interview sessions, FA techniques are used at the end of the unit in the absence of sufficient discussion of the specific area of the assessment activity, the criteria used for assessment, and timely feedback are not given properly. Nevertheless, all this data seem to contradict with the response teacher-respondents gave to item 6.6 (M=3.80, Table 6), that is, it is the FA procedures that frequently lead the overall assessment system. But the traditional tests are dominating the implementation of CA to writing.

The value of item 2.7 (M=3.30) in Table 2

tells us that while many teachers (75%) were reported to utilize FA as early indicators of future learning, some teachers(25%) still did not consider it as an important part of the teaching-learning process.

The mean value of item 2.8 (M=3.50) in Table 2 indicates that the teachers carry out discussions among the learners in face-to face mode so that students can learn from each other. This obviously develops their confidence (Brown & Knight, 1994). However, some teachers (25%) do not create such an opportunity to their students.

According to the value of item 2.9 (M=2.92), Table 2, FA activities seem to be practiced in the process of assessing writing sometimes. But the data collected through the classroom observation indicate that it is the SA that takes the maximum time in the overall assessment system in writing classes. The significant practices related to writing assessment observed in the class include questions and answers, home-take exercises that rarely get timely feedback, group work to be done and submitted to be graded. Teachers quite rarely provided timely feedback to the students and some of the instructors never provide any form of such feedback.

### **Workload**

Both students and teachers feel pressure when they are involved in writing continuous assessment activities. Producing a text consumes much of the students' time, and giving feedback and scoring the produced text is a burden to the teacher. For effective assessment of continuous assessment implementation, it is useful to assess teachers' and students' workload. Table 3 below presents the responses of the students to the workload issues.

**Table 3:** Students' Response to Items about Learning and Teaching-Load

Items	Always		Usually		S/times		Rarely		Never		T	M
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Teachers have enough time to give us descriptive feedback	7	17.5	7	17.5	12	30	9	22.5	5	12.5	40	3.05
We have enough time to give/take descriptive feedback	2	5	10	25	11	27.5	12	30	5	12.5	40	2.80
Group presentations are made in different periods	8	20	14	35	7	17.5	9	22.5	2	5	40	3.42
Not enough time is given to carry out FA in writing lesson	6	15	8	20	13	32.5	7	17.5	6	15	40	3.02
We assess each other's work at the end of each CA activities	5	12.5	9	22.5	13	32.5	12	30	1	2.5	40	3.12

Item 3.2 (M=2.80) in Table 3 and the data from the open ended-questionnaires administered to the teachers and the students tell us that they do not have time to give or receive feedback to or from the teacher to improve learning in writing classes. This clearly shows that the time factor is influencing the CA process in the college.

Item 3.3 (M=3.42) of Table 3 indicates that 72.5% of the teachers use group presentations at different periods which help the learners work in small groups and present their written work at different times. This helps teachers to reduce workloads (Spor, 2008).

The mean value of item 3.5 in Table 3 (M=3.12) indicates that peer assessment

occurs sometimes. Similarly, as shown in Table 9, item 9.3 shows that 6 out of 10 teachers use peer assessment as a means of solving the work load problems sometimes. But since peer assessment is one of the productive assessment techniques that can increase students learning and achievement, it should be used regularly and frequently.

#### Grading System

The assessment frameworks used in relation to teaching and learning writing in the college should be assessed and the table below depicts the results of the assessment.

**Table 4:** Students' Response to Items about Frame of Reference

Items	Always		Usually		S/times		Rarely		Never		T	M
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
We are told the criterion of each grade(A-F)	6	15	12	30	0	25	5	5	7	17.5	40	3.12
There is no criterion to grade our scores	5	12.5	3	7.5	8	20	5	5	19	47.5	40	2.25
CA results are used to diagnose writing problems	-	-	16	40	3	5	5	5	6	15	40	2.97
CA results are used for recording & grading	7	17.5	12	30	7	5	9	5	5	12.5	40	3.17
Reasons are told for giving feedback	6	15	8	20	7	17.5	13	32.5	6	15	40	2.87
Objectives of each task are told before assessment	9	22.5	5	12.5	1	2.5	10	25	5	12.5	40	3.07

The mean value of item 4.1 (M=3.12) in Table 4 shows that the teachers tell the students about the criteria against which their writing performance is graded only occasionally. This may affect the students' knowledge about the standards they are aiming for; instead, they need to know what good performance is and recognize the standards and principles of assessment. For instance, one of the principles of assessment is that assessment criteria for the tasks should be regularly communicated to the students explicitly and transparently.

As the mean value of item 4.2 (M=2.25) in the same table shows, the instructors use a certain grading scale though the type is not clear. As it is made clear from the interview data, almost all teachers grade students' performance using a norm-referenced grading scale, based on the competition among the students. This may also be one of the challenges in implementing the FA to writing in the context of the college.

The mean value of item of 4.3 (M=2.97), as shown in Table 4, shows that the CA results are used to diagnose students' writing sometimes. While about 13% of the respondents said that the results were rarely used for this purpose, 15% of them concluded that they never used for diagnostic purposes. This can mean that they used mainly for grading and reporting purposes which are the typical features of the traditional testing system.

The mean value of item 4.4 (M=3.17) shows that the teachers use the CA result for grading and reporting purposes sometimes. Firstly, while some of them

(22.5%) say they use it rarely for such purposes, some of them (12.5%) never use it for this purpose. Secondly, the general picture of their responses shows that nearly 65% of them use the result of CA for recoding and grading purposes. Thirdly, as discussed above, the students' and teachers' responses show that standards are rarely set to assess students' performance. These all show that there is a mismatch between the grading practice in the college and the principles of CA on one hand and any form of the CA result is used for grading and reporting purposes which clearly hinders the learners from checking their learning progress.

The mean value of Item 4.5 (M=2.87) shows that most instructors rarely tell the learners the reason of each feedback providing activity. While about 35% of the teachers try to tell their learners such a reason on a regular basis, 17.5% of them do so only sometimes; 32.5% of them rarely have the practice and 15% of them never explain the objective of giving feedback. This may mean that either there is no feedback on the regular basis or even though there is such a provision its objective is not told to the learners in advance.

#### **Application of FA Techniques**

The use of a variety of assessment techniques helps teachers to gather a number of samples of students work over a period of time. If constructive feedback is given to these samples of students work, they can promote students' learning and enhance the effectiveness of teaching practice. Table 5 presents the assessment results of the implementation of FA techniques.

**Table 5:** Students' Response to Items about Application of FA Techniques

Methods	Always		Usually		S/times		Rarely		Never		T	M
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Oral questions and answers	9	22.5	5	12.5	1	52.5	5	12.5	-	-	4	3.45
Student-self-assessment	9	22.5	6	15	5	37.5	8	20	2	5	4	3.30
Student-peer assessment	1	2.5	1	2.5	1	2.5	3	7.5	3	7.5	4	3.52
Teacher observation	3	7.5	0	0	5	37.5	7	17.5	5	12.5	4	3.1
Description, instruction...	2	5	1	2.5	1	37.5	9	22.5	2	5	4	3.10
Series of informal tests	3	7.5	9	22.5	1	2.5	6	15	4	10	4	3.02
Portfolios	5	12.5	9	22.5	1	2.5	5	12.5	6	15	4	3.05
Series of formal tests	5	12.5	1	2.5	1	2.5	7	17.5	7	17.5	4	3.00
Interview	8	20	7	17.5	1	2.5	4	10	8	20	4	3.07

As can be observed from Table 9 and item 5.1 (M=3.45) of Table 5 above, oral questioning and answering is one of the techniques the teachers frequently apply to carry out CA to assess writing. However, the data obtained through the interview and the classroom observations indicate that teachers use this technique rarely. Thus, it is inevitable that students lack some chance of developing their critical thinking abilities because of such a visible gap.

The mean value of item 5.2 (M=3.30) in Table 5 shows that the teachers sometimes use self-assessment technique as a means of carrying out CA. However, 20% of them rarely use it, and 5% of them never apply the technique. The mean value of item 2 (M=2.90) of Table 9, also shows us an occasional utilization of the technique. Such an ineffective use of the technique more likely has adverse effect on students' confidence (Brown & Knight, 1994).

The response of the students to item 5.3 in Table 5 (M=3.52) shows that 85% of them confirm that the instructors use peer assessment sufficiently. Nevertheless, the data collected through the interview and the classroom observations clearly indicate that there is inadequate implementation of this technique which makes things difficult to reduce any assessment load. But peer-and self-assessment can serve as resources for learning since students can learn from each other and assess their own and one another's work which gradually help them to become autonomous learners.

The mean value of item 5.4 (M=3.10) in Table 5 shows that there is an occasional application of the practice of teacher observation. However, 17.5% of them rarely use it and 12.5% of them never use it. Still, classroom observation shows that there was neither the preparation of check list nor an attempt to collect students'

profile in carrying out CA. This implies that there is very little chance of diagnosing students' writing problems.

Item 5.5 in Table 5 shows that only 37.5% of the students reported that there is enough practice of providing description and instruction on a regular basis while 35% of them said such activities appear only sometimes. But, nearly 30% of the students concluded that such CA activities are poorly performed in the college. This is a gap that should not be ignored.

The mean value of item 5.6 ( $M=3.02$ ) in Table 5 shows that the teachers use a variety of informal tests to practice CA sometimes. Similarly, item 9.6 in Table 9 shows that 5 out of 10 teachers use a variety of informal tests as a vital component of the CA procedures to assess writing sometimes.

As compared to the response given by the teachers regarding the use of portfolios ( $M=3.20$ , Table 9), the mean value of item 5.7 ( $M=3.05$ ) in Table 5 responded by the students shows the real practice of portfolios occurs sometimes though 35% of them reported the application of it on a regular basis and about 38% of them reported occasional practice. On the other hand, 27.5% of them reported quite poor utilization of portfolios in writing classes. Still, the data from observation show very rare use of this technique.

The students' and teachers' responses to item 5.9 show variations, that is, when 70% of the students reported the frequent use of this technique, only 4 out of 10 teachers admitted the occasional use of the technique. This implies interviewing has not been applied in the college but it is one of the important strategies which is used to assess writing.

### **Students 'Continuous Assessment Practice and Challenges: Qualitative Data**

#### **The Summary of Students' Responses to Open-ended Questionnaire and Interview Questions**

The major challenges that may affect the implementation of CA to writing, according to students' responses are shortage of time (50%) and lack of awareness on CA techniques (40%). The data collected from students and teachers (both the close-ended and open-ended questionnaire) confirm the existence of the time factor as a big challenge to apply CA to writing. Regarding the awareness factor, the quantitative data indicate there is a gap in discussing the objectives and area of each assessing activity and also in immediate feedback provision. Lack of interest and motivation from the students' side were reported as problems. The other factors include the lack of students' ability in expressing themselves in writing and little use of peer-assessment.

Regarding the purpose of carrying out CA, the data collected through interview from students indicates that 90% of the teachers grade CA writing activities and they have been using the norm - referenced grading scale until the last four months of the academic year. According to this approach, the focus is only on a few better achievers. The approach quite deviates from the principles of CA.

The responses to the interview questions indicate that 75% of the respondents claimed the time factor may be due to heavy working load and 90% of them concluded that they are assessing large classes (50-53 for them). This shows many gaps in providing timely and descriptive feedback that affect the application of CA.

**The Practice of Continuous Assessment from Teachers' Perspective****Table 6:** Teachers' Response to Items about Feedback Provision

Items	Alw	Usu-	S/ti	Rar-	Never	Total	M
	-ays	ally	mes	ely			
	N	N	N	N	N		
FA feedback indicates learning progress	-	5	5	-	-	10	3.50
Feedback used as part of teaching	1	7	2	-	-	10	3.90
Feedback provided is qualitative type	1	5	3	1	-	10	3.60
Feedback provided per minutes	-	2	4	4	-	10	2.80
Feedback provided is quantitative type	-	3	3	3	1	10	2.80
FA techniques dominating that of SA	2	6	1	-	1	10	3.80

As shown in Table 6 above, the mean value of item 6.1 (M=3.50) shows a significant utilization of feedback on CA to check learners' progress rather than using it for mere summative purposes. But, five of respondent teachers use it only sometimes which indicates that there is some more activity left to fulfill for effective utilization of CA. Similarly, the mean value of item 6.2 (M=3.90) shows a high provision of feedback as a vital component of CA that in turn improves learning. But, 2 of the 10 teachers said that they use it only sometimes. The responses to this item indicate the use of continuous assessment for teaching purpose. This belief is in line with the principles of continuous assessment.

Item 6.3 in Table 6 shows that English instructors provide qualitative feedback that shows trainees their direction of strength and weakness. Although the majority of them (nine out of ten) said so, one of them still provides the students only quantitative sort of feedback. But this finding has not been triangulated by the qualitative data obtained.

According to item 6.4 in Table 6, 4 out of 10 teachers provide verbal feedback in minutes for enhancing learning sometimes. Four out ten of teachers admit that they give feedback per minutes rarely. However, providing feedback in minutes is considered as a vital component of the classroom teaching learning process (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

The responses to item 6.5 in Table 6 and to item 6.3 in the same table reveal that the teachers provide more of qualitative feedback as the mean value (M=2.80) of the latter item shows. Nevertheless, six out of ten teachers write merely the numerical values on students' written work almost regularly. But this does not inform learners about their learning progress and such an approach works little to alleviate students' short comings on their written work (Brown, 2004).

Item 6.6 (M=3.80) above shows that the FA leads the SA activities. This is because the majority of the teachers admit that they frequently use FA techniques to give feedback to the writing performance of the students. This response confirms with the

responses given to items 6.2 and 6.3 that show feedback is used as part of teaching and the feedback given is qualitative in nature. All these show that the dominance

of FA techniques. However these findings were not be supported by the qualitative data obtained through interview and observation.

**Table 7:** Teachers' Response to Application of CA techniques:

<b>Techniques</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Usually</b>	<b>S/times</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>
	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>		
FA techniques are used as part of teaching	2	5	3	-	-	10	3.90
Encouraging students for reflection	-	7	2	-	1	10	3.50
Quizzes are used to grade students' work	1	1	7	1	-	10	3.20
Formal tests are used as a form of FA	1	2	5	1	1	10	3.10
SA takes the highest frequency	-	2	1	2	5	10	2.00
CA is used for recording & grading purposes	-	3	2	2	3	10	2.50
I have sufficient time for CA	-	3	3	1	3	10	2.60
Students FA activities are graded	-	-	1	2	7	10	1.40
FA is used to show performance	-	6	2	1	1	10	3.70
CA records are used for learning	1	4	1	4	-	10	3.20

The mean value of item 7.1 (M=3.90) in the above table shows a good practice of FA as an integral part of the teaching learning process to assess students' daily progress. This response seems contradictory to their response to item 6.4, Table 6 above. That is, there is shortage of immediate feedback on FA. Furthermore, according to Table 7, 3 of the 10 teachers reported that the implementation of the techniques as a part of the lesson occurs sometimes.

Item 7.2 in Table 7 (M=3.50) above shows that most of the instructors (9 out of 10) encourage the trainees to reflect on FA activities which enable them to get feedback from their peers. This can reduce the assessment load if it is effectively used (Heaton, 1990; Hedge, 2000; Ellis, 2003). However, one instructor said that he never gives the learners opportunity to do this. This may have an adverse effect on making an assessment process formative, as the chance of feedback provision becomes less.

Most of the instructors (almost 9 out of 10) use quizzes for grading as well as reporting purposes as shown in item 7.3 of Table 7 (M=3.20). Besides, they reported that they do not give immediate feedback to the learners. This shows the dominance of the culture of the traditional tests in the college.

Similarly, item 7.4 (M=3.10) in Table 7 shows a fair application of formal tests since more than 80% of the teachers use SA as a form of FA. This can be effective only when students are able to move beyond the stigma of bad grades, when there is immediate feedback, when the area, the objective, and the criteria of such tests are well stated and communicated to the students in advance of the test administration (Brown, 2004; Black et al, 2004). One of the respondents reported

that he never uses this technique as FA maybe because he always uses the SA results for mere grading purpose.

Item 7.7 (M=2.60) in the above table shows that 4 out of 10 teachers lack time to assess students' CA activities maybe because of the problem of assessing large classes. Item 7.8 in Table 7 (M=1.40), on the other hand, indicates that most of the teachers do not give grade to FA activities which contradicts to their response to the data obtained through the classroom observations. That is, they use informal tests, quizzes, and activities such as summarizing text, and so on. These activities help teachers elicit data about the students' performance. Based on the responses to items 7.3 and 7.4, (both in Table 7) teachers admitted that they grade both informal and formal tests.

Item 7.9 (M=3.70) of Table 7, on the other hand, indicates a significant practice of the FA with some noticeable gaps. The last item 7.10, (M=3.20) shows that 6 of the 10 teachers recorded both the FA and the SA results as an important source for further learning. But, four of them disclosed that they rarely develop such record for this purpose. This shows that there is danger of using such records for mere grading purposes in the college which may not tell anybody about students' past, present and future learning.

### **Workload**

When teachers engage in assessment activities, they are required to design effective assessment activities and provide constructive feedback that can improve students' learning. These things among others require fair workload from the teachers' side; therefore, it is useful to take into account the workload issues. The table below presents the response of teachers to workload issues.

**Table 8:** Teachers' Responses to Items about Work-load

Items	Always	Usually	S/times	Rarely	Never	Total	M
	N	N	N	N	N		
Fairness of work load for doing CA	2	4	2	2	-	10	3.60
Self & peer assessment used to reduce load	-	1	7	1	1	10	2.80
assessment areas limited to reduce load	-	3	3	4	-	10	2.90
Written work assessed against criteria	1	4	5	-	-	10	3.60
areas of assessment informed to learner	2	3	3	2	-	10	3.50
Purposes & criteria of CA explained	3	3	3	-	1	10	3.70
FA used to reduce stress on exams	1	4	1	3	1	10	3.10

Item 8.1(M=3.60) in Table 8 above shows that the teaching load the teachers are working with is relatively fair. Eight of them are working with fair and workable teaching loads. On the other hand, 2 of them say they are working with heavy loads. Still, the interview result shows high problems of the working loads in addition to assessing large classes (50 and above in the context of the college).

Item 8.2 (M=2.80) in the same table indicates that 7 out of 10 teachers use student self- and peer assessment techniques as a means of reducing their workloads sometimes. Furthermore, item 8.3 in Table 8 (M=2.90) shows a restriction of the area of writing assessment as a strategy to lessen teachers' as well as students' assessment load. This inevitably worsens the assessment conditions in the college.

As shown in item 8.4 in Table 8 almost all teachers reported that they assess writing work using certain criteria. Nevertheless, the responses of these

teachers and the data from the interviews and the classroom observations show that almost no teachers prepare rubrics or standards upon which learners are assessed. According to Andrade (2001), this can definitely reduce the objectivity of the assessment.

The response to item 8.5 in Table 8 indicates that most of the teachers clearly and frequently inform their learners about the specific area of assessment before carrying out the process. But 2 of 10 teachers do not use this strategy. Although item 8.6 in Table 8 shows that almost all teachers communicate the purpose and criteria of CA, the interview data indicate that most of interviewees do not explain the objective of assessment. The primary objective of CA is to promote students' learning of writing in this context. Therefore, if any test is not preceded by clearly stated assessment criteria or standards, objectives and area of focus, it does not represent the CA procedures (Andrade, 2001; Brown, 2004).

**Table 9:** Teachers' Responses: Further Application of CA Techniques

Assessment Methods	Always	Usually	S/times	Rarely	Never	Total	M
	N	N	N	N	N		
Oral questions and answers	3	2	3	-	2	10	3.40
Student-self assessment	-	1	7	2	-	10	2.90
Peer assessment	-	3	6	-	1	10	3.20
Teacher-observation	3	-	4	3	-	10	3.30
Tasks: description, instruction, etc.	3	4	3	-	-	10	4.00
Series of informal tests	-	2	5	3	-	10	2.90
Portfolios	-	4	4	2	-	10	3.20
Series of formal tests	-	4	3	3	-	10	3.10
Interviews	-	-	4	2	4	10	2.00

According to item 9.1(M=3.40), Table 9, while 5 out of 10 teachers use questioning

and answering effectively and 3 teachers use it occasionally. But the remaining two

teachers reported not using the technique. According to Black et al (2004), teachers should focus on those questions that require students to develop their critical thinking ability. Hence, some of the teachers of the college may have weakness in capacitating the students with the ability to critically think.

Item 9.2 (Table 9) and item 8.2 (Table 8) with mean values of  $M=2.90$  and  $M=2.80$  respectively show poor application of self-assessment technique which may narrow the chance of active participation of students in assessing their work by themselves. But research has shown that there is a positive correlation between self-assessment and language proficiency results (i.e., Litz, 2009; Ross, 1998). In addition, self- assessment is found to help the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to develop a sense of ownership to their own learning (Bullock, 2011). A more recent study shows that if self-assessment is equipped with explicit instruction, such as the use of checklists, assessment rubrics or reflective journals, it can improve the quality of writing (Lam, 2013).

Peer assessment is occasionally used for formative purpose as mean value of item 9.3 in Table 9 ( $M=3.20$ ) shows. If this technique is used properly and regularly, it provides learners with the opportunity to learn from each other (Brown & Knight, 1994). The effective use of peer assessment for EFL writing instruction is also beneficial for improving students' learning of writing (Zhao, 2014).

There are enough observation activities of classroom teaching learning process as a technique of CA, as item 9.4 in Table 9 ( $M=3.30$ ) indicates. Furthermore, 3 out of 10 teachers said that they always use a variety of checklists and rating scales to carry out observation. This helps the

teachers to make records of students' progress for future learning (Hedge, 2000).

As observed from Table 9, item 9.5 ( $M=4.00$ ) shows that the most frequently used CA techniques are tasks such as describing things or people, giving instructions and exchanging information. Informal tests, quizzes, exercises on coherence, vocabulary and so on are practiced close to sometimes as FA technique as the mean value item 9.6 ( $M=2.90$ ) indicates. But 3 of 10 the respondents rarely exposed the trainees to such activities.

Item 9.7 ( $M=3.20$ ) in the above table indicates that English instructors (8 out of 10) make use of portfolio sometimes. But this technique has to be used regularly because it is useful for students since it helps them to understand their strengths and drawbacks and get advice what they need to do in order to improve their writing abilities (Lam & Lee, 2010). In addition, a writing portfolio can show texts produced by the students over a period of time and these texts demonstrate the students' effort, performance and development in writing (Weigle, 2007).

Regarding the use of writing portfolio assessment, Lam and Lee (2010) came up with the useful procedures of portfolio process in which three formative strategies can be used. One is teacher can give ongoing feedback to the students throughout the portfolio process while producing their writing starting from their first drafts to the final product. Second, completing their first drafts students have to hold a conference with their teacher individually after class. Third, the students should be allowed to engage in peer review process so as to give and receive comments from their partners. By engaging in portfolio assessment process,

students will increase the quality of their learning.

According to item 8, (M=3.10) in Table 9, there is a practice of summative tests that are occasionally administered at the end of a unit. As observed from the table, the majority of the teachers use the formal tests to assess trainees' written work. This confirms the response given to item 7.4 of Table 7. The responses of both items indicate that the SA is dominating the FA in assessing written work. Finally, the mean value of item 9.9(M=2.00) in Table 9 shows a very poor application of an interview to diagnose students' writing difficulties.

### **Teachers' Continuous Assessment Practices and Challenges: Qualitative Data**

Literature on assessment has a concern on quality of the existing practices of schools, since there is a shift from summative to formative assessment. It would seem timely to identify the major challenges that hinder the effectiveness of the continuous assessment. The major problems associated with continuous assessment can be summarized from open ended questionnaire, interview and observation as follows.

#### **Response to Open ended Questionnaire**

The questions asked to the teachers include the possible factors they think can affect the implementation of CA to writing, CA methods they apply, purposes of using FA results and typical tasks they give to the student-teachers to carry out the process. Workload and class size cases have been mentioned as major problems that hinder the effective implementation of continuous assessment. The other factors pointed out by the teachers include lack of proper feedback provision and its poor quality and emphasis still given to SA in the college. Finally, poor preparation of

modules, lack of CA activities, and lack of commitment, motivation and interest from the teachers' side were the other factors which need further research.

#### **Interview**

To collect data regarding whether teachers plan on CA and its purposes, whether they discuss rubrics with learners and grade FA activities, their working load and whether they apply CA techniques, ten English teacher-educators were interviewed.

The data from six of the teacher-educators was video-recorded. Most of them said they plan on FA activities and a teacher disclosed that the purpose is only for learning; most of them said that they use the plan and the result of the FA for both grading and learning purposes. The former may be the purest form of the FA procedures while the latter is the use of the SA activities as an alternative technique of the CA strategies with some carefully stated criteria. However, there was a big gap in feedback provision, discussion on the criteria and the area of the assessment activity with the learners as the data secured through questionnaire, interview and classroom observation showed.

Regarding the working load, 90% of them responded that it is very heavy when considering the very nature of assessing writing. One teacher said that there was time when an individual teacher assesses more than 100 students' written work in addition to other work given by the college. So, this load-factor may hinder the frequency of feedback provision. In relation to peer assessment, two teachers individually responded that "I use peer assessment strategy".

However, some of the teachers said that "Peer assessment technique cannot be effective technique because students usually expect grade at the end of its

completion which cannot be practical". Besides, the response of the teachers and the learners on the close-ended questionnaire showed that there was a gap in the use of peer assessment as an alternative technique of CA.

Some of the teachers explained that most of them assess large classes; they were commonly given two sections each consisting of 50 or 53 students. Furthermore, they do not frequently use peer and self-assessment so that they could lessen the large class problem. This still shows a gap in using the appropriate CA methods to reduce the problems.

### **Observation**

Six teachers were observed for three fifty-minute periods. The classes consisted of 40 to 53 students on average. This obviously has had an impact on the application of CA to written work as it challenges the standardized frequency of feedback provision.

First, no teacher or no student was observed to develop a plan on FA activities. Furthermore, most of them do not prepare standards or rubrics to carry out the process. Second, there was a gap in specifying the specific objectives/rubrics upon the completion of which they would demonstrate or produce some written work. Third, questioning and answering was the CA technique mostly practiced but insufficiently used as the class was almost teacher-oriented. This hinders the participation of the students and lessens the information sharing capacity among the learners. The poor application of peer and self- assessment methods worsens the teaching loads. Fourth, it was at the close of the academic year that a criterion-referenced grading scale began to be used to measure the students' performance; before that, it was the norm-referenced scale that was applied. The former case

contradicts the principles of CA because it considers only few achievers (Hedge, 2000). Fifth, very few of the instructors had records of variety of CA results to use them to improve learning. Finally, CA activities such as note-taking, summarizing a text, and writing a parallel text were simply listed in the modules but students were poorly involved in them.

### **A Lesson Account of the Observation**

Writing lessons were observed and the observations were made on one teacher in three days, each for 50 minutes. In the first day the teacher introduced the lesson and provided an explanation of descriptive paragraph. Next, dividing the students into six groups, he asked them to write a descriptive paragraph in groups and told them to submit the work next week.

On the second day, the teacher repeated the same procedure he followed the previous week but this day he focused on another topic-"Narrative Paragraph". Eventually, he collected the written work from each group and took home to rate them. Here, there was not any attempt to use self or peer- assessment techniques; there were not any criteria of assessment set and explained to the students.

On the third day, the class was conducted on the week of the second round observation. The teacher returned the home- take group activity with surprisingly no qualitative feedback but with mere numerical value each group scored.

In sum, the lesson was almost teacher-centered where the students passively learned. This indicates that there was rare chance of CA feedback exchange between the learners and the teacher and among the learners as the teacher wrote just the numerical value the learners scored.

Furthermore, even the quantitative feedback provided was not immediate and hence contributed little to indicating learning progress. There was no chance of using peer and self-assessment techniques to reduce the load gaps.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **CONCLUSION**

After triangulating the data obtained through the close-ended and open-ended questionnaire administered to the teacher-educators and student-teachers, the major findings were summarized below.

English instructors of the college were providing more of the quantitative feedback that rarely shows student-teachers' continuous progress in developing their writing skills. Moreover, the time standard for effective feedback provision suggested by Angelo & Cross (1993) (within minute's time gap) was not realized and even the quantitative type of feedback was rarely provided.

There is high emphasis of the SA techniques over the FA ones to assess students' written work as formal tests are the most frequently used form of all CA methods applied to writing skills in the college. Continuous assessment methods such self- and peer-assessment, interviewing and observation techniques on are poorly utilized (Table 9, item 2, M=2.90; item 6, M=2.90 and item 9.9, M=2.00 all in the same table).

It was the norm-referenced grading scale applied in the college to grade CA activities which does not go in line with the principles of CA. Continuous assessment results are rarely used for diagnostic purposes. They are used mainly for reporting and grading purposes. So, there is

less chance for the students to check their learning progress. The grading system they are expected to use is criteria referenced assessment which is a means of evaluating students' performance, achievement and progress against set criteria.

There are many gaps in applying self and peer assessment to reduce work-loads and to assess large classes (usually 50 and above). Moreover, there is high shortage of time to carry out the CA (Table 3, items 3.1 & 3.2, M= 3.05 and M=2.87, respectively). There are more problems in relation to workload. These include works done to communicate the assessment areas are limited, rubrics of each of the CA activities to the learners are not set and communicated, and restricting writing activities to specific areas to reduce assessment load is frequently practiced.

The major challenges encountered during implementing CA to writing classes in the college include lack of immediate, timely and descriptive feedback provision, lack of opportunity for sharing assessment criteria with student teachers, heavy work-loads together with large class size and the mismatch between the frame of reference being used and CA principles.

Finally, according to Brown (2004), a major paradigm shift away from an emphasis on exam-oriented assessment to the ongoing CA is vital towards improving learning and planning for better teaching. He also says that although both FA and SA are possibly applicable to improve all aspects of language assessment, the former is very essential in particular way to assess writing. From this point of view, the study showed that there is a partial practice of the CA activities in the college to assess students' written work.

This study was, therefore, conducted with the intention of assessing the

implementation of CA in writing classes in the college. The study provides insights into the nature of assessment practices in the college. But the practice of the CA activities in the college to assess students' written work is not sufficient enough to improve the learning and teaching of a writing course in the college. There are several gaps in all aspects of the research questions set in the introductory chapter.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on surveys, interviews, open-ended questions, classroom observation and the reviews of literature, the following informative suggestions have been recommended:

- The instructors should:
  - Expose students to variety of diagnostic informal or formal assessment activities to see where they are with reference to some decided standards.
  - Prepare checklists to record students' learning progress and discuss with them
  - prepare standards and inform them in advance to the learners to avoid anxiety
  - Use self and peer assessment techniques regularly to reduce assessment loads
  - Help peers to present their written work in different times or periods.
  - Limit at a time the area of the writing activities upon which the learners are assessed
  - Give immediate and constructive feedback to the students using appropriate techniques.
  - Engage sufficiently in continuous assessment practice which is policy supported directive to improve student language learning.
- The college should:
  - Reduce some of assessment problems such as large class size and heavy teaching loads through revising the number of students a teacher-educator should assess.
  - Make the grading scale of students' performance in agreement with the assessment policy proposed by TESO (AED, 2006), that is, criteria-reference framework should be used consistently.
- Student-teachers should:
  - Be actively engaged in assessing themselves and their peers through some checklist.
  - Know that self and peer assessments do not directly affect the final grade but help them reduce assessment loads, develop their confidence as well.

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