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Effects of Assessment on Classroom Learning in Senior High Schools in the Ashanti Mampong Municipality of the Ashanti Region of Ghana

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Abstract:

The research aimed at finding out the extent to which assessment promotes effective teaching in the classroom and also influences classroom learning. A total of 40 teachers and 70 students randomly selected from two out of the five Senior High Schools in the Mampong Municipality of the Ashanti Region, Ghana, were involved in the study. The descriptive research design was used. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire which was in two forms with one for teachers and the other for students. The questionnaire for the teachers mainly centred on their assessment practices and what they make of the feedback they receive from students' assessments while that for the students mainly centred on the effects that the assessment practices of their teachers have on their learning. Two research questions guided the study. Data analysis was mainly by proportions. The study revealed that the assessment practices of teachers promoted their classroom teaching to a very great extent. Out of the 10 elements of good assessment practices that have the propensity to contribute to improvement in teaching that were listed on the questionnaire, most of the respondents (more than 65% in each case) indicated that they practiced nine of them, either to a large extent or to a very large extent. Again, it was revealed that teachers' classroom assessments improve learning. It was found out that out of the 10 ways by which teachers' assessment practices influence students' learning that were listed on the questionnaire, most of the students (more than 70% in each case) agreed that nine of them actually influenced their learning positively. It was recommended based on the findings that teachers in their bid to prepare their students for assessment tasks should always apply both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational techniques to ensure maximum learning in students in order for them to excel on assessment tasks. Also, teachers should be selective in the kind of feedback they give to the high and low achievers in their classrooms by way of the comments they write on students' scripts. This will help psych the low achievers up to have a sense of "being able to perform".

Keywords: *assessment, effective teaching, Learning, summative assessment, formative assessment*

1. Introduction

It is absolutely impossible for anybody to study in an entire educational system without being exposed to a wide range of educational and psychological assessment procedures. This is because, constantly in an educational system, decisions have to be made about students, curricula and programmes, and educational policies. According to Nitko (1996), decisions about students include managing classroom instruction, placing students into different types of programmes, assigning them to appropriate categories, guiding and counselling them, selecting them for educational opportunities and credentialing and certifying their competence. Decisions about curricula and programmes include decisions about their effectiveness (summative assessment) and about ways to improve them (formative assessment).

It is worthy of noting that the functions of assessments enumerated above are undoubtedly made possible through effective assessments. Tests are the most widely used assessment procedure in every educational system and considering the purposes they serve, they are just indispensable. Testing and teaching are systematically interwoven. According to Stiggins (1999), a typical teacher can spend a third to a half of his time on assessment related issues. Also, Quairain (1992, p.1) contends that "tests provide needed information for evaluation. Without evaluation, there cannot be feedback and knowledge of results. Without knowledge of results, there cannot be any systematic improvement in learning."

The assertion by Quairain (1992) above clearly points to the fact that to ensure systematic improvement in learning through effective teaching, there must be effective assessment practices in an educational system. It is therefore worth the task investigating into the effects of assessment on teaching and learning in an educational system with the view of finding out whether the right impacts are being felt as a result of teachers' assessment practices.

2. Statement of the Problem

The assessment practices and use of assessment results by lots of teachers worldwide leave much to be desired. Studies by Duschl and Gitomer (1997) in the USA reported that teachers do not trust or use their assessment results. Both in questioning and in written work, teachers' assessments focus on low level aims, mainly recall. There is little focus on such outcomes as speculation and critical reflection and students focus on getting through the tasks and resisting attempts to engage in chancy cognitive activities. They continued that although teachers can predict the performance of their students on external tests, though tests reflecting low level aims, their own assessments do not tell them what they need to know about their students' learning.

The facts as expressed above signal that lots of classrooms are missing out on the potentials that assessments hold for improving teaching and learning. Studies have proven that the consistent use of assessments, especially formative assessment, which is also known as assessment for learning, has actually shown promise in improving students' learning and achievement (Black & William, 2006; Earl & Katz, 2006; Assessment Reform Group, 2002).

It is based on the problem stated above that this research was conducted in the Mampong Municipality of the Ashanti Region of Ghana to find out the extent to which the assessment practised by teachers promote effective teaching and also influence learning in the classroom.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research was to find out the extent to which assessment promotes effective teaching and also influences classroom learning.

4. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions.

- To what extent do teachers' assessment practices promote classroom teaching?
- In what ways do teachers' assessments influence classroom learning?

5. Significance of the Study

The outcome of the study would be a source of reference for all second cycle institutions on the effects of assessment on teaching and learning. Inclusive in this is that, it would be beneficial to both the teacher who wishes to use assessments effectively in his classroom to promote learning and the student who wishes to use other techniques and strategies to learn based on how assessments are planned by teachers and the feedback gained from them.

6. Research Design

The study used the descriptive research design. This was based on the assertion of Cohen and Manion (2007) that the descriptive research design has the potential to generate useful and analysable data that represent a wider target population; generate numerical data for ease of comparison; and provide descriptive, inferential and explanatory information.

7. Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The target population for the study was the teacher and student populations of the Senior High Schools (SHSs) in the Mampong Municipality. Two out of the five SHSs in the Mampong Municipality which were Nsutaman Senior High School and St Peter's Seminary Senior High School were randomly selected for the study.

A total of 40 teachers and 70 students giving a sample size of 110 were randomly selected from the two schools. Equal numbers of 20 teachers were selected from each school on the basis that the staff strengths in both schools were roughly equal. On the part of the students, proportionate numbers of students were selected where the school with the larger population which was Nsutaman Senior High School had 40 students selected while the other, St Peter's Seminary Senior High School, had 30 students selected.

8. Instrumentation

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire which was in two folds with one for teachers and the other for students. The questionnaire for the teachers mainly centred on their assessment practices and what they make of the feedback they receive from students' assessments while that for the students mainly centred on the effects that the assessment practices of their teachers have on their learning. Questionnaires were administered by the researchers themselves.

9. Analysis of Data and Discussion of Findings

The data were analysed on the basis of the research questions. Frequency and percentage tables were mainly used in the analysis.

9.1. Research Question One

To what extent do teachers' assessment practices promote classroom teaching?

Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of practice of 10 classroom assessment guidelines/principles outlined on the questionnaire for teachers.

Table 1 below shows teachers' responses to their level of practice of the 10 items on the questionnaire in order to show the extent to which their teaching is promoted by their assessment practices. The items were assessed on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "to a very little extent" (the least practised) to "to a very large extent" (most practised).

Items	To a very large extent		To a large extent		To very little extent		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	Total F	Total %
1. To know individual student's progress toward the attainment of course objectives, teachers must assess students periodically.	15	37.5	18	45	7	17.5	40	100.0
2. Students are assessed on every topic taught in order to get prompt and immediate feedback to decide on students' readiness for next phase of instruction.	15	37.5	20	50.0	5	12.5	40	100.0
3. Summative assessments are based on all topics taught for a specified period (e.g., a term).	25	62.5	12	30	3	7.5	40	100.0
4. Poor or low assessment scores of students retard the teacher's work and vice versa.	9	22.5	18	45.0	13	32.0	40	100.0
5. Teachers apply extrinsic motivation to ensure maximum learning in students in order to excel on assessment tasks.	10	25.0	7	17.5	23	57.5	40	100.0
6. Evaluation motivates the teacher to put in extra effort to promote teaching and learning.	24	60.0	14	35.0	2	5.0	40	100.0
7. Assessments direct the teacher as to what to teach and what to leave out.	14	35	21	52.5	5	12.5	40	100.0
8. Classroom assessments give immediate feedback to the teacher to help evaluate his own teaching method.	17	42.5	21	52.5	2	5.0	40	100.0
9. Students' performance on external examinations influence teaching in the classroom.	31	77.5	7	17.5	2	5	40	100.0
10. Assessment is indispensable tool in the classroom and a means to an end.	25	62.5	14	35	1	2.5	40	100.0

Table 1: Teachers' Responses on the Extent of Influence of Assessment on Teaching

It could be seen from Table 1 above that with each of the elements of good assessment practices that has the propensity to contribute to improvement in teaching that was listed on the questionnaire, most of the respondents (more than 65% in each case) indicated that they practiced it either to a large extent or to a very large extent. The only exception was the issue of "teachers applying extrinsic motivation to ensure maximum learning in students in order to excel on assessment tasks", in which only 42.5% of the respondents indicated they practiced it either to a large extent or to a very large extent. A larger proportion of 57.5% indicated that they practiced it only to a little extent.

The desired assessment practices that respondents engaged in, therefore, are as follows:

- To know the progress of individual students toward the attainment of overall course objectives, teachers assess their students periodically.
- Students are assessed on every topic after teaching in order to get prompt and immediate the feedback to decide on students' readiness for the next phase of instruction.
- Summative assessments are based on all topics taught at the end of a specified period of time. (e.g., at the end of term).
- Poor or low assessment scores of students retard the teacher's work and vice versa.

- Evaluation motivates the teacher to put in extra effort to promote teaching and learning.
- Assessments direct the teacher as to what to teach and what to leave out.
- Classroom assessments give immediate feedback to the teacher to help evaluate his own teaching method.
- Students' performance on external examinations influence teaching in the classroom.
- Assessment is an indispensable tool in the classroom and a means to an end.

By the findings in Table 1, it could be concluded that the assessment practices of teachers in the Mampong Municipality to a very great extent promote their classroom teaching.

If the assessment practices of teachers will have the tendency to promote classroom teaching, then there must be a very huge focus and concentration on the potency of prompt and immediate feedback from assessments to the teacher first, and to the student second. This is, however, emphasised in Table 1, item 2 that, "Students are assessed on every topic taught in order to get prompt and immediate feedback to decide on students' readiness for next phase of instruction", in which 87.5% of the teachers indicated they practised it either a very large extent or to a large extent. Another issue which needs comment is item 8, which is that "Classroom assessments give immediate feedback to the teacher to help evaluate his own teaching method", in which 95% of the teachers indicated they practised it either to a very large extent or to a large extent. This is indeed a very good sign for assessment for learning.

The nature of teachers' responses in table 1 suggests that teachers have the desired confidence and trust in their classroom assessment results and hence, their usage and reliance such results to influence their teaching. This is in contrast to the findings of studies by Dushl and Gitomer (1997) in the USA which reported that teachers do not trust or use their assessment results.

On the issue of the potency of prompt and immediate feedback to promote classroom teaching, Butler (1988) asserts that in normal classroom work, the effectiveness of formative feedback will depend upon several detailed features of its quality, and not on its mere existence or absence. The consequential effects of any type of feedback on the low and high achievers alike must always be examined by teachers before they alter their teaching in their bid to produce expected results. Teachers should always be mindful of the fact that one major function which classroom evaluation serves through assessment is self-evaluation of teaching methods and techniques. Teachers are therefore implored to maximise the use of the feedback from their classroom assessments to help give off their best in order to achieve the best in their classrooms.

9.2. Research Question Two

In what ways do teachers' assessments influence classroom learning?

Students in the study were asked to respond to 10 items on the questionnaire to indicate their degree of agreement to the ways in which teachers' assessment practices influence their learning. Again, the items were assessed on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "to a very little extent" (the least agreed) to "to a very large extent" (the most agreed). Table 2 below shows students' responses on the ways by which assessment influences classroom learning.

Items	To a very large extent		To a large extent		To very little extent		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	Total F	Total %
1. Instant and timely feedback from assessments encourages students to learn harder.	41	58.6	28	40	1	1.4	70	100.0
2. Assessment feedback of a student shows the student's true strengths and weaknesses in a subject and directs him as to what to learn.	34	48.6	33	47.1	3	4.3	70	100.0
3. Consistent assessment scores of a student reflect the student's true level of intellectual ability as compared with others.	30	42.9	21	30	19	27.1	70	100.0
4. Answering of teachers' questions during instruction contributes to effective learning.	24	34.3	28	40	18	25	70	100.0
5. A plan of assessments for the term compels students to learn consistently throughout the term.	25	35.7	40	57.1	5	7.1	70	100.0
6. There is a relationship between teachers' teaching and assessment questions.	15	21.4	34	48.6	21	30.0	70	100.0

7. Poor assessment scores retard effective learning on the part of students.	11	13.7	22	31.4	37	52.9	70	100.0
8. Teachers' assessment techniques incorporate intrinsic motivation which boosts students' learning.	23	32.9	31	44.3	16	22.9	70	100.0
9. Assessments help to sustain the students' concentration during instruction.	32	45.7	27	38.6	11	15.7	70	100.0
10. Assessment is a determinant for teaching and learning.	24	34.3	37	52.9	9	12.0	70	100.0

Table 2: Students' Responses on the Ways that Assessment Influences Classroom Learning

It could be seen from Table 2 above that with the exception of the seventh issue raised on the questionnaire which is an offshoot of teachers' assessment practice, which is, "poor assessment scores retard effective learning on the part of students, the rest of the nine ways by which assessment influence students' learning had most of the students (more than 70% in each case) agreeing that they really influence their learning positively.

The ways by which assessment influences students' learning, therefore, are as follows:

- Instant and timely feedback from assessments encourages students to learn harder.
- Assessment feedback of a student shows the student's true strengths and weaknesses in a subject and directs him as to what to learn.
- Consistent assessment scores of a student reflect the student's true level of intellectual ability as compared with others.
- Answering of teachers' questions during instructional period contributes to effective learning.
- A plan of assessments for the term compels students to learn consistently throughout the term.
- There is a relationship between teachers' teaching and assessment questions.
- Teachers' assessment techniques incorporate intrinsic motivation which boosts students' learning.
- Assessments help to sustain the students' concentration during instruction.
- Assessment is a determinant for teaching and learning.

It is worthy of noting that all the nine assessment factors above influence students' learning positively. It could therefore be concluded from the analysis in table 2 that classroom assessment improves learning.

It should be noted that in the Ghanaian second cycle classroom, the kinds of teacher-made assessment procedures which are used are mostly quizzes, tests, writing assignments, class exercises, and project work. These are prescribed by the Continuous Assessment Programme which was part of the package of the 1987 New Educational Reforms in the country. The frequency of administration of these assessments to students is dictated by the Continuous Assessment Programme. The finding above is clearly consistent with the assertion of Guskey (2003) that the assessments best suited to guide improvements in student learning are the quizzes, tests, writing assignments, and other assessments that teachers administer on a regular basis in their classrooms. Guskey continued that "teachers must trust the results from these assessments because of their direct relation to classroom instructional goals and that, the results are immediate and easy to analyze at the individual student's level" (p.6).

It should be well noted, however, that to use teacher made assessments to ensure improvements in students' learning, teachers must purposively focus on the proper and guided use of assessment. This is because, the consistent use of assessments, especially formative assessment, has actually shown promise in improving students learning and achievement (Black & William, 2006; Earl & Katz, 2006; Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Again, formative assessment must be largely emphasised because it has the potential to reduce the achievement gap by helping low achievers the most (Black et al., 2004; Black & William, 1998).

Teachers must embrace classroom assessment with a comprehensive view and also change their interpretation of assessment results, focusing more on criterion-referenced interpretation which is diagnostic in nature to help students identify their problem areas and also know the extent to which they have achieved instructional goals. Finally, teachers need to see that an assessment is an integral part of the instructional process and as such, an indispensable tool in the classroom.

10. Conclusion

As Ghana continues to move forward with the implementation of its New Educational Reforms with its special focus on the Continuous Assessment Programme, now termed School Based Assessment, the findings of this study are welcoming news. Concerning the extent to which teachers' assessment practices promote effective teaching, the finding that teachers mostly practise nine out of the 10 issues raised means that to a very great extent, the assessment practices of SHS teachers in the Mampong Municipality promote effective classroom teaching.

Secondly, concerning the ways in which classroom assessments influence students' learning, it is worthy of knowing that students responded positively to nine out of the 10 issues that were raised in the study. It could therefore be concluded that the assessment practices of teachers in the Mampong Municipality influence classroom learning positively.

11. Recommendations

Based on findings of the study, it is recommended that:

- Teachers in their bid to prepare their students for assessment tasks should always apply both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational techniques to ensure maximum learning in students in order for them to excel on the assessment tasks.

School authorities are also advised to organise frequent in-service training especially for the non-professional teachers to sensitise them on good methods of teaching and good motivational techniques.

- On the issue of the tendency of “poor assessment scores retarding effective learning on the part of students”, 45.1% of the students agreed to it and this is a worrying issue. This is because of its capacity to derail the process of classroom learning. It is therefore recommended that teachers should be selective in the kind of feedback they give to the high and low achievers in their classrooms by way of the comments they write on their scripts. This will help psych the low achievers up to have a “sense of being able to perform”.

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