

Teachers' and Students' Perceptions towards the Practice of Assessment of Learning: Implication for Future Job Performance of Would Be Graduates

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Abstract This study investigated teachers' and students' perceptions towards the practice of assessment of students' learning in the Faculty of Educational and Behavioral Sciences (FEBS), Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. To realize their perceptions, therefore, survey design was used. A close-ended questionnaire item with five point Likert scale was administered to twenty four teachers and one hundred students. In addition, to substantiate the data obtained through questionnaire, two FGDs with students, nine participants in each group, were conducted. And, interviews with 6 experienced instructors were also held. The quantitative data was analyzed using one sample t-test and independent samples t-test. One sample t-test was used to determine the status of teachers' and students' perception towards the practice of assessment. The independent samples t-test was employed to see whether there is significant difference between teachers and students in their perception towards the assessment practice. The qualitative data which was collected using interview and FGDs was described qualitatively using narrative analysis. Results of the one sample t-test revealed that teachers' and students' have unfavorable perception towards the practice of assessment. They perceived that the practice of assessment in the faculty was more of theoretical and most of them assumed that students need further practical training to perform to the standard in the actual job situations. The findings also indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between teachers and students in their perceptions towards the practice of assessment. Regarding the factors that affect the practice of assessment, almost all the student participants believe the following are main factors: heavy influence of the earlier approach to methods of teaching and assessment (behaviorist) which is usually practiced by teachers; teachers give more attention to grading instead of enabling students to be competent through careful engagement of practical assessment tools; some teachers are not professionally competent; on the other hand teacher participants of the study enlisted the following as main factors: students are not responsible for their own learning; students give priority to passing exams rather than developing competence; lack of clarity on competence-based assessment among students and teachers. Large numbers of respondents held the view that the practice of assessment was not in line with future job requirements of the graduates. Based on the findings obtained, recommendations were forwarded.

Keywords: *assessment, competence- based assessment, perception, Ethiopia*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Assessment is the most important strategy we can do to help our students learn [[10,11,12,13,16,19,27,36], Saliu as cited in Kapukaya, [24]]. It is argued that, to be part of the learning process, assessment should be learner-centered and should reflect a learner-centered curriculum [11]. The type of assessment used can also have a powerful influence on the learning behavior of students [5]. In an earlier study, [12] also stated that if tests do not measure important and meaningful content, skills, and knowledge, then precious time and resources are wasted. This implies that assessment instruments should be

designed in such a way that they can measure the required competences of students which enables them to compete in the labor market. In doing so, offering a variety of assessment methods is often recommended as good practice. But, there should be a lesser concentration on traditional written assessments, particularly time constrained unseen exams, and a greater emphasis on assessment instruments that measure not just recall of facts, but the students' abilities to use the material they have learned in live situations [competence and performance assessment]. This conceptualization is further supported by previous studies [1,10,12].

It is known that in the contemporary world of work and context of globalization which is characterized by rapid and dramatic changes, the attainment of competence has become an integral component of individual, organizational and national strategies [1,10,14,26,28,31,34,38,39].

Likewise, Brown (2004:82) explained that: “If we want our students to demonstrate employability when they graduate, our assessments need to be designed to be practice-orientated” [competence-based]. [1]:14 further emphasized:

Learners need to be flexible and adaptive if they are to function well in today’s complex and global societies. To support the needs of these new learners, education is changing its focus from one of transmitting isolated knowledge and skills to one of acquiring complex competences, guiding learners in developing skills for learning and getting information from the diverse range of sources available in modern society. In short, education is increasingly becoming learner-centered and competence-based.

From the views of experts reiterated above, it seems plausible to argue that competence-based assessment should be used to assess the competences of students in different disciplines than assessing simple recalling of facts. Learning and assessment should be aligned to the world of work so that would be graduates can demonstrate superior performance. Based on these rationales, higher education institutions all over the world are heavily involved in the development of both particular competencies and overall competence which ultimately leads towards faster economic growth through active contribution in different professions as well as in society as a whole [3,26,31]. [33]:9 further confirmed that:

...tertiary education alleviates poverty through the direct contributions to economic growth generated by its influence on a nation’s productivity and international competitiveness. It achieves this by training a qualified and adaptable labor force, by assisting the nation to access and generate new knowledge, and by adapting global knowledge for local use. In this way, it helps to determine living standards.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The Ethiopian education and training policy [18]:15 sub article 3.3.4 declared: “Higher education at diploma, first degree and graduate levels, will be research oriented, enabling students become problem-solver, professional leaders in their fields of study and in overall societal needs”

Furthermore, Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009:4979 article 4 sub article 1, that one of the objectives of higher education is to “prepare knowledgeable, skilled, and attitudinally mature graduates in numbers with demand-based proportional balance of fields and disciplines so that the country shall become internationally competitive”

To achieve the above mentioned objectives, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ethiopia have embarked on major reforms since the last decade. For the reforms to take effect, the institutions have practiced Business Process Reengineering (BPR) as a tool. In the reengineering of the teaching-Learning Core Process, *modularization* was proposed as the best way for the implementation of curricula and the production of competent global graduates. There are a number of reasons why HEIs have chosen modularization: firstly, the existing curricula are discipline based and the courses are fragmented. They are not organized around competences. As a result, the curricula do not enable HEIs to produce

competent graduates. Secondly, students who are getting drop out from the universities are simply a waste of human resources since they cannot be certified in any of the competences as a result of the fragmented courses [37].

Hence, in 2012, the Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions started implementation of modularized curriculum with the intention of producing competent and well-equipped graduates. This was done all over the nation by taking competence-based education theory as a ground. Following this theoretical background, changes in the curriculum were made [from fragmented courses to modular, where courses are organized in line with major competences]. An alignment with earlier proclamations like Article 41 (Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009:5005-5006) which provides modes of students’ assessment in HEIs was also made. Specifically, sub-article 41.4 offers details of assessment strategies including fairness in assessment and competency-based assessment. All these details are similar to the constructive alignment theory of proponents like [6] who recommended to reform assessment in line with curriculum change. However, it was observed that the assessment strategies in Bahir Dar University as one of the HEIs of Ethiopia remain unchanged. Students are complaining about the type of assessments given to them across faculties and colleges. As they boldly explained in the annual teaching-learning process performance evaluation forum, the assessments given to them have the following limitations: They are traditional in type; they focus more on theory than practice; poor cooperative learning; no timely feedback; and above all weak connection to the world of work. Nevertheless, researchers like [1,25] argued that educational assessments should correspond to what is expected from students in the world of work. Accordingly, therefore, this study was aimed at exploring the perceptions of teachers’ and students’ towards the practice of assessment of learning in FEBS, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Though the problem is across the university, this faculty was selected since it has staffs with long-years of experiences to theories of learning, assessment and instruction.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The present study was devised with the objective of:

- assessing the perception of teachers towards their practice of assessment of students’ learning
- exploring the perception of students towards the assessments they took during their three year stay in the university
- determining whether there is significant difference between students and teachers in their perceptions of the assessment practice in the faculty and
- identifying the factors that affect the practice of assessment in the faculty.

1.4. Research Questions

- What perception do teachers have towards the practice of assessment of learning?
- What perception do students have towards the practice of assessment of learning?

- Is there a significant perception difference between teachers and students towards the practice of assessment of learning?
- What are the factors that affect the practice of assessment of learning?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study has both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the findings will add some scientific concepts on the existing knowledge in general and in Ethiopian literature in particular. Practically, the information obtained from the research will help the faculty, instructors and others concerned, with the quality of education, to work hard on the issues that improve the quality of graduates through improving the quality of education by giving special attention to competence-based learning and assessment.

2. Conceptual Framework

The far-reaching consequences of competence-based education, particularly, due to its expressed attempt to better link education to the labor market and to stimulate students to become lifelong learners has been widely acknowledged by different scholarly works [26,40]. Currently, it has been expressed keenly that institutions in many developed and developing countries are adapting their programs to it. However, this adaptation must be accompanied by learning and assessment that actually support competence development.

Moreover, the effects of competence-based learning environments, and the surplus value they are supposed to

have above traditional ones, have never been adequately studied [1]. Thus, competency-based assessment is a process that determines whether a person meets the standards of performance required by a job [21,38]. A well accepted position among educational researchers and teacher educators is that the *best* classroom assessments are *authentic* (Archbald and Newman; Bergen; Gronlund; Meyer; Newman, Brandt and Wiggins; Wiggins) as cited in [19,20].

[4] enlisted the points to be considered during competence-based assessment if the pitfalls it encounters are to be eliminated: clarity in the concept of competence; reducing over reliance on standardization of competencies and looking at competence-based education in its context; though difficult, there is a need to integrate learning in schools with learning in the workplace; there should be assessment of competencies, especially, in work situations; teachers and students should change their roles as facilitators and responsible learners; and competence-based management which is based on principles of open culture and co-operation. In a similar vein, from the view of holistic conceptualization of competence, [22] stated the theoretical notions which have been put forward to characterize CBAs and can be enlisted as: focusing on performance in various authentic situations, combining multiple methods, involving multiple assessors preferably with different backgrounds, using criterion-referenced scoring, and integrating learning with assessment activities. Thus, the study was based on the theoretical overview of the characteristics of CBAs mentioned by many researchers and the reasons for their importance [[22]:112].

Table 1. Theoretical CBA characteristics and their Theoretical Explanations or Reasons

Theoretical Characteristics	Theoretical Explanation or Reasons	References
• Contextualized in professional practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resembling real professional practice in activities, context and thinking processes and assessment criteria • Assessing true professional competence requires measurements of performing professional tasks in the real, complex professional world 	Benett(1993); Gulikers et al., (2004); Segers et al., (2003)
• Collaboration with/involvement of work-field	Developing and conducting the assessment should involve practitioners	Baker (2007); Gulikers et al., (2007)
• Incorporation of multiple methods/moments that address product and process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing the complexity of competencies requires a combination of assessment methods addressing competence in different situations. • Competence implies flexibility: more attention to the process of solving a problem next to the actual solution (=product). 	Baartman et al., (2006); Kaslow et al., (2007); Linn et al., (1991).
• Multiple assessors, preferably with different backgrounds	• Assessors with different backgrounds have different reference frames for judging the same performance. ‘The truth is a matter of consensus’, Inter-subjectivity, instead of objectivity.	Johnston (2004);Baartman et al., (2006); Benett (1993); Schuwirth & van der Vleuten (2006)
• Addressing higher-order processes, including reflection and/or self-assessment, and the ability to transfer to new situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competent performance in complex world requires many higher-order thinking processes and flexibly using them in various situations • Professional performance requires performing professional tasks, but also reflection in and on action; stimulating life-long learning skills by incorporating self-assessment 	Scho’n, (1987); Baartman et al., (2006); Birenbaum et al., (2006); Dierick & Dochy (2001)
• Integrated with instruction	• To stimulate required learning processes, instruction and assessment should address the same competencies and learning processes	Birenbaum et al., (2006); Dochy (2005); Gulikers et al., (2004).
• Individualization of assessments	• Assessment should allow for differentiation between students to be responsive to students’ needs and situations	Dierick & Dochy (2001); Segers et al. (2003)
• Increased student responsibility and involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students should be given more responsibility over the content, form, and timing of their assessment • Students should be involved as co-developers and/or co-assessors 	Biemans et al., (2004); Gulikers et al., (2004); Sluijsmans & Prins (2006)
• Combining assessment of and assessment for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback is crucial for making assessment a learning experience • Also summative assessments should inform further learning, development and teaching (formative purpose) 	Birenbaum et al., (2006); Harlen (2005)
• Criterion-referenced scoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating against a required level of competence (=criteria/standards) instead of comparing students (norm-referenced) • Literature shows debate about appropriate level of detail of criteria 	Grainger et al., (2008); Johnston (2004)
• Transparency of assessment	Assessment and its criteria should be known beforehand for all participating parties, including students, as this guides student learning	Dierick & Dochy (2001); Gulikers et al., (2004, 2008)

Adopted from: [[22]:112].

3. Design and Methodology of the Study

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. It is always necessary that before any progress can be made in solving a problem, a description of the phenomena be made. Description is made with the intent of making improvement of a situation. In the present study, the researcher aimed to assess teachers' and students' perceptions towards the practice of assessment in the Faculty of Educational and Behavioral Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia with the intention of identifying areas that need effort for future improvement.

The population for the study was all the 2015 graduating class students and all teachers of the faculty. This faculty was selected purposively since it has a longer history of training teachers in both pre-service and in-service programs. In addition, the faculty is well known for giving short-term trainings to newly recruited teachers of other colleges and faculties in the University in the areas of instructional methods and assessment and evaluation of learning. Fifty percent of teachers and students were participated in this study using random sampling technique. A total of twenty four teachers and one hundred students successfully responded to the questionnaire.

A questionnaire consisting of seventeen items was used to collect the data. The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the first part provided the demographic information and the second part consisted of items about teachers' and students' perceptions towards the practice of assessment. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher based on literature on competence-based theory; particularly, on the theoretical CBA characteristics forwarded by [22]:112]. The items were designed in a five point Likert scale. The researcher gave levels of Likert scale numerical

values to estimate the extent of agreement with statements in the questionnaire as: 5 was given for strongly agree (SA), 4 for agree (A), 3 for undecided (U), 2 for disagree (D) and 1 for strongly disagree (SD). The content validity of the questionnaire was checked by two experts of educational Psychology from the department of psychology. The instrument was then pilot tested in one department from another faculty in the University. A reliability coefficient of 0.856 using Cronbach's alpha was obtained. The questionnaire was distributed to students in their classrooms and to teachers in their offices by the researcher. To make the study rigorous, two FGDs with students (three students from each department) were conducted. Each FGD comprised of 9 members. The groups were introduced about the purpose of the study. Their informed consent was also requested so as to record the discussion. The researcher herself facilitated the discussion. In addition, interviewing 6 experienced instructors; who were drawn from each department, was held to further access more validated data.

The responses from the questionnaires were coded, scored and then analyzed using both descriptive (means and standard deviations) and inferential (one sample *t*-test, independent samples *t*-test) statistics. The data obtained through FGDs and interviews were described qualitatively using narrative analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

A one sample test was conducted on the perception scores to determine whether the samples mean were significantly different from 51, the test value. The sample mean for teachers 47.97(SD=9.54) was significantly different from 51, $t(23) = -3.176$, $p=0.002$. Again, the sample mean for students 45.00 (SD=6.58) was significantly different from 51, $t(99) = -4.467$, $p=0.000$.

Table 2. Teachers' and Students' Perceptions towards the Practice of Assessment by Role

Role	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	df	Test value	t-test	p-value
Teacher	24	47.9700	9.53934	23	51	-3.176	0.002
Student	100	45.0000	6.58060	99	51	-4.467	0.000

The results of Table 2 indicated that, generally, both teachers and students had unfavorable perception towards the practice of assessment. However, students had a more unfavorable perception towards the practice of assessment than their teacher counterparts. This implies that, teachers

and students perceived the assessment practice as more of theoretical. To determine whether the difference in mean scores were significant, a *t*-test was computed and the results are indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Perception Differences between Teachers and Students towards Assessment Practice

	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Equal variances assumed	1.443	122	0.152	2.97000
Equal variances not assumed	1.803	49.145	0.078	2.97000

Critical values $t(df = 122, \alpha/2 = 0.025) = 1.980$.

The calculated value of $t(1.803)$ is less than the critical value of $t(1.984)$ which shows that there is no statistically significant difference in perception towards the practice of assessment by role (between teachers and students) at 0.05 level of significance.

Generally, from the results of Table 2, and Table 3, it was found that the practice of competence-based assessment viewed from the view of *holistic conceptualization* is a neglected element in the teaching and learning process of the Faculty. The proclamations by the government of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia; however, acknowledged

competence-based education which has to follow integrated (holistic) approach (Yizengaw as cited in [32]). [33]:9), (Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009:5005-5006). Furthermore, the findings of this study also showed that, the assessment focuses on the measurement of lower level learning outcomes using traditional tests like true/false, multiple choice items and the assessment is carried out by the course instructor alone. This contradicts with the theoretical characteristics of competence-based assessment where, involving multiple assessors from different backgrounds, using authentic

assessment and definite criteria for scoring are highly required to enable graduates to perform to the standard on the job [23,25], Archbald and Newman; Bergen; Gronlund; Meyer; Newman, Brandt and Wiggins; Wiggins, as cited in [19,20].

The statistical findings in this study were also triangulated with the results of two FGDs with students and interviews with experienced teachers. FGDs student participants stated the following problems related to the practice of assessment. These are: a) lack of commitment among teachers; b) competence-based assessment is more demanding of time and effort and teachers are not taking the initiative; c) failure to provide appropriate & timely feedback by teachers; however, Birenbaum et al., and Harlen, as cited in [22] explained that feedback is very important for making assessment a learning experience. d) no clear definition of the concept competence and the learning outcomes though scholars recommended to make the terms clear in order to eliminate their pitfalls [4]. f) heavy influence of the earlier approaches of methods of teaching and assessment (behaviorist) which is usually practiced by teachers although the underlying reason for making assessment competence-based is to reduce the gap between what is learned in school and what is needed in the workplace [1]; g) teachers give more attention to grading instead of enabling students to be competent through careful engagement of practical assessment tools; and f) finally, some teachers are not professionally competent. Likewise, teachers who were interviewed explained the following problems: a) students are not responsible for their own learning; b) students give priority to passing exams rather than developing competence; c) lack of clarity on competence-based assessment among students and teachers; this is also in line with the research findings of [4]; d) focus to standardized rules and regulations by both teachers and school administrators; e) development of hatred by students towards teachers; particularly, to those who provide practical-based assessments; f) large class size of students, and g) absence of culture of cooperative learning between teachers and school administrators. Nevertheless, both students and teachers had remarked that the following points were very constructive and should be further strengthened in the faculty: These are: a) the practice of peer-led learning; b) though rarely; practical attachment between class room learning and potential employer institutions; c) group and individual assignment given by teachers which encourages students learning from students; and d) limited exercise of teaching-learning in a simulated environment.

The potential problems outlined by both teachers and students were almost similar to the research findings done by [4]. Briefly, when it was viewed in line with the theoretical characteristics and theoretical explanations or reasons sketched by [4] as it was depicted in Table 2 above, the practice of assessment in the Faculty was found full of constraints

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

As it is already indicated by researchers in the field of competency theory, competence based curricula should be

aligned with competence based assessment which needs: contextualized practice (authentic environment), multiple assessors, integration of instruction and assessment, collaborative culture, increased student responsibility for learning, transparency of assessment, provision of appropriate and timely feedback to students, and changing role of teachers from lecturers to facilitators, among many others. Unfortunately, these CBA principles were found not properly practiced. Though the government of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia declared; particularly, in its proclamations that HEIs should follow competence-based approach and introduced business process reengineering to foster the reform, teachers were still practicing the behaviorist paradigm. This paradigm, in its turn, is accused of fragmentation of learning. Therefore, competence-based education and competence-based assessment though formalized in legal documents; it is concluded, are still practiced as the resemblance of behaviorist approach.

5.2. Implication

It is noted that all rounded development is possible when there is qualified human resources who can perform to the standard. However, the present study reveals that graduates are not assessed in the way they can be professionally competent. This has implication to the country's aspiration to achieve all rounded development.

5.3. Recommendations

The findings of the study seemed to have the following practical recommendations for both policy makers and policy implementers. These include:

- Competence-based approach is a new concept to Ethiopian higher educations. Thus, there is a need to increase awareness of teachers, students and concerned stakeholders.
- Teachers and students are accusing each other and there is a problem of role confusion/ambiguity. There is need to formulate rules and regulations so that students, teachers, and school administrators can take their own responsibility clearly.
- Competence-based education and assessment needs flexibility in approach. There is a need to allow teachers and students construct knowledge in their own context.
- Managers of Higher Education Institutions and teachers should exploit the potentials of cooperative learning. Accordingly, there is a need to establish good interpersonal communication to realize the practice of competence-based education and its assessment approach.
- Assessment should be aligned with real job environment and lifelong learning. Therefore, there is a need to invite potential assessors from potential employer organizations. However, this is a non-existent practice in the studied area.
- Competence-based education and assessment practice is a demanding task. Therefore, there is a need to maximize the *professional competences* of teachers through stimulating their engagement

in professional learning and competence development.

- Finally, there is a need to conduct in-depth further research on competence-based education and competence-based assessment in the Ethiopian higher education institutions context, since; the current study focused only on one faculty in one of the higher education institutions.

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