

**TEACHING TO THE TEST: AN INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING
STRATEGY?**

By

Shogbesan, Yusuf Olayinka (yusufolayinka813@yahoo.com)

and

Bamidele Abiodun Faleye (bamidelefaleye@yahoo.com)*

Department of Educational
Foundations and Counselling,
Faculty of Education,
Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

*: Corresponding Author

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Abstract

The innovations in educational assessment have resulted in a shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning. This is becoming increasingly popular among educational assessment experts and school teachers. However, this paper examines the concept of “teaching to the test” and also determines whether it can be an effective strategy to be adopted for the promotion of assessment for learning. The reasons why teachers have to teach to the test were discussed as well as how the approach can be effectively used to enhance learning. The paper concludes that “teaching to the test” when appropriately used by teachers can be another strategy for ensuring assessment for learning.

Keywords: Teaching to the Test, Classroom Assessment, Learning, and Assessment for Learning.

Introduction

Educational assessment refers to a formal attempt to determine students’ status with respect to educational variables of interest (Popham, 2002). It allows the individual learner to get the educational support they need to succeed as well as the effectiveness of different educational methods. Nwana (1979) opined that no matter how effective the teacher, how intelligent the pupils, how adequate the audio visual equipment, if no provision is made for some evaluation of progress, the teaching effort may be invalidated. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and the derived education improvement cannot be realized without effective assessment (Essien 2010). Also, teachers can also use assessment informally in the classroom to judge what progress pupils have made with their understanding, and to provide information on how they can be helped to move forward. Meanwhile, with improvement in the quality of teacher assessment through initiatives which include one of the innovation in assessment is changing school Based Assessment from “Assessment of Learning” to “Assessment for Learning” centering on promoting, rather than undermining, good education.

School based assessment (SAB) according to Onuka and Oludipe (2006) is an assessment practice that broadens and expands the forms, mode, means and scope of assessment in the school in order to facilitate and enhance learning by providing immediate feedback. It is therefore imperative that research efforts must be properly directed at variables capable of promoting successful implementations of the innovative policy which will lead to its appropriate achievement. While teaching is aimed at providing instructions and guidance to ensure that learning occurs, it also encompasses all activities that will help achieve learning. Assessment also lies in the heart of promoting learning which is also the principal aim of teaching. But increasingly, assessment is also seen as a tool for learning which plays a “formative” role – allowing teachers to identify gaps in student learning and to adapt teaching appropriately. Hence, teaching and assessment principally should have learning as their end product. The traditional practices of assessment of the last century focus

on administration of test with the sole aim of preparing them for examination. In line with the fact above, Atsumbe (1996) stated that the basic tools for evaluation in the last century has been the administration of formal tests and sometimes standardized tests imposed outside the classroom.

In discussing the uses of assessment, it should also be noted that assessments can often be used for both formative and summative purposes. Formative is the use of day-to-day, often informal, assessments to explore pupils' understanding so that the teacher can best decide how to help them to develop that understanding while Summative is the more formal summing-up of a pupil's progress that can then be used for purposes ranging from providing information to parents to certification as part of a formal examination course. However, for the purposes of further discussion, Stobart (2008) stated one use of assessment as helping to build pupils' understanding, within day-to-day lessons. From the viewpoint above, it can be seen that formative assessment is a central part of pedagogy. This explains why many teachers find it hard to implement; it may challenge them to change what they do, how they think about learning and teaching, and the way in which they relate to their pupils.

According to research evidence of the TLRP :Learning How to Learn project, it suggests that what teachers need is not rigid lesson plans but frameworks of key ideas that will enable them to maintain the "flow" towards learning goals whilst adapting the lesson to take account of pupils' ongoing struggles or leaps forward in understanding.

It should be noted that frequent summative testing is not, of itself, formative. Therefore there is the need to shift from traditional purpose of assessment to discover whether learning as occurred to "assessment for learning" in pedagogy.

Concept of Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning (AfL) is no longer a new concept in the school system. It is an assessment that is useful in generating comments that could provide either or both the teacher and students with direction for improvements of learning or teaching (Faleye and Ojerinde, 2005). In 1999, the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) defined Assessment for Learning as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there". From the ARG definition above, learning can be seen as a journey in which learners need to know where they are at present, where they are going, and how to get from the one place to the other. The term "Assessment for Learning" is often used interchangeably with "Formative Assessment". This is because series of research evidence (as cited in Faleye, 2008) support the assertion that the formative feedback provided in AfL have great impact in the improvement of students learning and performance (Black and William, 1998; William, Lee, Harrison, and Black, 2004).

However, in understanding the uses and impacts of assessment, it is important to see the assessment system as a structure which both provides information for teachers and also influences what they do. The latter may lead to a changing influence in classroom teaching, although not necessarily positively. Then, what can the teacher do if the aim of formative feedback is to help learners to grow in capacity to manage their own learning and develop capability in specific subject domains?

Should the teacher “teach to the test”?

Concept of “Teaching to the Test”

The traditional approaches to teaching are often characterised as involving “direct transmission” where teachers communicate knowledge in a clear and structured way, and demonstrate and explain solutions. Here, the students have few opportunities to experiment with or apply new knowledge in different situations. There is little attention paid to student motivation, or to developing skills for “learning to learn” (OECD, forthcoming). Obviously, classroom assessments that are devised after instruction is over will have scant impact on what the teacher teaches (Popham 2002).

Moreover, in understanding the uses and impacts of assessment especially as it influences what the teachers do, it is important to know that since high-stake tests have consequences for students who were required to take those tests, what was being measured by the tests began to influence the nature of what was taught in the classroom. Also, given the ever-increasing reliance on student test results as an indicator of teacher’s instructional effectiveness, it was only natural that many teachers tried to address instructionally whatever was to be tested (Popham, 2002). High-stakes assessments have indeed succeeded in focusing teachers and school leaders on high priority standards, providing incentives for teachers to “**Teach to the Test**”

Teaching to the test might mean that teachers *re-allocate* time and *re-align* priorities in order to spend more time on content likely to be covered in the tests, thus narrowing curriculum. They may also *coach* students in test-taking skills (Cizek, 1998; Koretz, 2005; Popham, 2002; Smith and Rottenberg, 1991; Stecher, 2002).

Research in the United States strongly suggests that educators, particularly in schools that are under the greatest pressure to show improvement, are teaching to the test, not the standards. In addition, if standards are not well-designed, or if they lack specificity, teachers will also have an incentive to teach to the test (Koretz, 2005; Linn, 2005). The problem is that no single test can measure proficiencies in any given domain exhaustively. This is because they take place over a very limited period of time and therefore cannot cover all learning priorities.

Coaching, another way in which teachers respond to external assessments and examinations is never a desirable approach. Coaching may focus on substantive and/or non-substantive aspects of tests. For example, if teachers notice certain patterns in tested content and then prepare students to focus on that content, they are engaging in “substantive” coaching. Substantive coaching may border on cheating if teachers provide students with advance access to tests, or provide inappropriate assistance during the examination session. When teachers help students to develop test-taking tricks (*e.g.* how to recognize distracters in multiple choice tests, while not necessarily learning how to recognise the correct answers), they are engaging in “non-substantive” coaching (Koretz, 2005; Popham, 2002).

Teaching to the test approach considered as being “student-centered”, or “constructivist”. It provides the students the ability to synthesise knowledge across the curriculum. Teachers take on different roles, moving away from “front-of-the classroom” teaching to more active engagement in the learning process with students; students conduct their own inquiries and develop solutions.

Teachers and students may tailor programmes according to the learning needs and interests of individual students (OECD, forthcoming).

However, several countries have policies promoting the use of formative assessment as a way to build students' skills for self-assessment and learning-to-learn, and to raise levels of achievement, particularly for low performing students [Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom] (OECD, 2005).

Innovative approaches to education are increasingly part of the common discourse. Yet, within schools and classrooms, innovations tend to happen only at the margins and may not be sustained overtime. In Nigeria, teachers have not been taking formative feedback seriously in the classroom (Faleye and Dibu-Ojerinde, 2005). Apart from this, the focus of the bulk of assessments in schools appeared to be tailored towards the measurement of what a learner can do after receiving an instruction. Teachers then give a measure based on some criteria which may or may not be free from bias (Adediwura, 2006).

Also, in a study conducted by International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA], (1999) showed that traditional approaches, including teacher-led structured activities such as lectures and students working on assignments, were dominant in almost all countries. These tensions play out in conflicting policies and practices related to assessment and innovation.

Nevertheless, there are different views over the teaching needed to achieve instructional aims, and over the means to assess their achievement which may also reflect the development of skill by teachers in **“Teaching to the Test”** as an innovative strategy. Hence, what should be taught and therefore assessed in school may continue to be controversial.

Adopting the “Teaching to the Test” as another strategy of Assessment of Learning

In pedagogy, the teacher will have to be concerned with a clarification of the “construct” before developing valid measures to assess it. These tasks can be broken into two categories. Namely;

- developing teaching/lesson plan and ;
- developing a testing plan

The former leads to assessment of achievement of well defined learning objectives as stated in the lesson plan, while the latter looks for evidence of learners capacity to know, understand, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate what they have learn. Also, the teacher is encouraged to use varying tools for the assessment of different topics and domains as listed in the curriculum for all subjects (NECO, 2002).

Moreover, since the two tasks mentioned above are of crucial importance in pedagogy and considering the limited time to cover a very full curriculum as well as time-limited tests to cover a very full curriculum; the way out to accomplishment of both tasks can be through an integration of teaching and testing especially to ensure “Assessment for Learning”.

In a view to integrate teaching and testing, there should be effective alignment of standards, curriculum and assessment. In a well-aligned system, the learning objectives identified in the standards will cover the curriculum content, and the tests really measure students' knowledge and

skills in relation to those standards. Certainly it is vital to ensure that tests are well-designed and aligned with broader goals for curriculum and teaching and learning. Hence, the assessments will eventually take into account relative emphasis of different elements of standards and curriculum. But, if systems are poorly aligned, it is impossible for schools and teachers to draw valid conclusions about student performance, or to adapt teaching to better meet identified needs – the central goal of Standards Based Assessment systems (Linn, 2001, 2005; Haertel and Herman, 2005).

Although, no system can achieve perfect alignment especially if standards are poorly designed or not specific enough, teachers are more likely to focus on tests, thus narrowing the focus of teaching. Baker (2004) points to the complexity of school systems as a barrier to tight alignment – including the number of links across different components of school systems, the diversity of regional contexts, differences in organizational contexts of schools, the range of teacher and school leader capabilities, the level resources devoted to professional development and other support for teachers. Given this complexity, it is very difficult to develop clear and explicit relationships across standards, instruction and assessments.

According to the RAND Corporation “Implementing Standards-Based Accountability” (ISBA) study, conducted between 2004 and 2006, teachers are more focused on standards, but also using less desirable strategies to improve test scores. The study found that the majority of teachers surveyed reported that they had increased their focus on topics emphasised in state test, as well as on the style and formats of tests. They also spent time on developing students’ test taking skills (Stecher and Hamilton, 2006). A positive finding was that about two-thirds of mathematics teachers in this three state survey reported that they focused more on central standards when looking for more effective ways to teach as a result of the state assessment system (Stecher and Hamilton, 2006). In most cases, however, fewer than half of the teachers surveyed agreed that the tests were good measures of the standards, raising concerns that teachers referred to tests, rather than standards, to determine what should be taught (Hamilton and Berends, 2006).

Popham (2002) in his writing on how testing can help teaching focus on two assessment based strategies for instructional improvement.

- Making instructional decisions in the light of assessment results and;
- Planning instruction to achieve the objective(s) represented by the test.

According to Popham (2002), the first strategy is the foremost function of classroom assessment. He states further “if teachers do accept the proposition that students’ performances on assessments should inform a teachers instructional decisions, they will usually discover there are three major categories of decisions that can be made better if students’ assessment performances are considered”.

The three kinds of instructional decisions as given by Popham (2002) include;

- What to teach?
- How long to teach? and;
- How effective was the instruction?

Using formative assessment becomes particularly important given the new learning skills needed in the 21st century: skills such as team working, independent enquiry, self-management, reflective

learning, effective participation and creative thinking (Gardner, Holmes & Leitch 2009). They need a wide range of opportunities to learn and practice these skills. This happens when teachers know their students, collect data to monitor progress, give feedback and prepare them for all assessment possibilities.

However, the second strategy with which few teachers are familiar require a rethinking about the role of educational assessment. Planning instruction to achieve the objective(s) represented by the test will require that what is to be assessed will influence the teacher's instructional decisions. It will serve as an operational definition of whether an objective has been achieved which enables the teacher to meaningfully clarify the curricular objectives that are being pursued and to skillfully select suitable instructional means to achieve those stated objectives.

Furthermore, teacher should never teach towards the classroom test itself. Instead, teachers should teach towards the knowledge, skills and or abilities that are sampled by the classroom test (Popham, 2002). If teachers wish to derive maximum instructional dividends from their classroom assessment, they must construct their assessment before instructions and continually ask themselves the question; can I teach what this assessment instrument measures? Hence, they will appropriately "teach to the test". This will not only raise performance on a test, but also raises students' preparation-to-post preparation mastery of the assessment domain being tested. Test should not be regarded merely as instructional afterthoughts. Tests, if they are worth the considerable efforts we often put into their creation, really ought to help teach better (Popham, 2002).

Teaching to the Test: The bad practices

If 'teaching to the test' merely means having students complete numerous practice tests in an attempt to prepare for national testing, it narrows the curriculum (Mills2008) and is clearly not an engaging activity for many. But suppose that it means preparing students for a wide repertoire of activities that value and judge their progress in learning. This can be achieved by making sure there are opportunities for students to work alone, as well as together, and to complete tasks within a tight time frame as well at their own pace. Like learning and teaching, assessment is not a singular thing, suggests Earl (2003). When teachers involve students as partners in the assessment process, it can help students build a strong sense of self-efficacy and develop skills of judgement. Assessment then becomes far more than merely a one-time event attached to the end of a teaching program. (Stiggins, 2009). As Gardner, Holmes and Leitch (2009) suggest, there is no reason why examinations and tests should not be used formatively. How teachers and students use the feedback is the key.

The problem of teaching to the test can be resolved. Some have argued, by ensuring that the test is worth teaching to. It is important to note that no single test can capture student performance across an entire subject domain; this is so because even when systems are well aligned, the highest-quality test may only cover a subset of knowledge. Tests that focus only on those aspects of a subject that are easy to measure – for example, recall of facts and figures – dramatically narrow the scope of learning. Also, performance-based assessments are also subject to score inflation if contents are not frequently changed, or if teachers ignore development of skills that are not part of the test (Koretz, 2005).

According to Black & Wiliam (1998) the following will affect assessment as a tool for learning.

- Tests that encourage rote and superficial learning
- Over-emphasis on the giving of marks and grades at the expense of useful advice to learners
- Competitive teaching approaches that demotivate some students
- Feedback, testing and record-keeping that serve a managerial function rather than a learning one

Conclusion

It will therefore conclude that the “teaching to the test” when appropriately used by teachers can be another strategy to ensure assessment for learning. It is important that teachers should be well aware of how to use the strategy and also avoid the bad practices associated with it.

Recommendations

- i. Teachers should ensure that they engage in practice that are professionally and educationally defensible in view to ensure the practice of “teaching to the test” is properly used as an assessment for learning strategy.
- ii. The classroom teacher should also ensure that they develop their assessment tools early prior to classroom instruction. This will guide their instructional objectives as well as selection of suitable means to accomplish them.
- iii. The body of knowledge and skills represented by the test should properly align with the curriculum.
- iv. The teacher should avoid the bad practices associated with “teaching to the test”. Most importantly, it should not just be used to raise student performance but also effectively used to ensure mastery of the assessment domain being covered.
- v. Also, the teachers should not direct instruction specifically towards the actual items on the test itself; rather he/she should endeavor to teach to the content represented by the test as outlined in the curriculum.

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