

# The Compulsory Sequential System of Assessment in Cameroon: Evidence of a Conceptual Misunderstanding

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## ABSTRACT

Reforms in education, especially classroom practices, succeed only when teachers articulate beliefs and perceptions either during the planning phase or realization. At the introduction of the Sequential System of Assessment (SSA) in Secondary Schools in Cameroon, it was presumed it would increase commitment by school administrators and teachers to the use of students' tests data and feedback to improve student learning and their own accountability for student learning. In practice, however, it is largely summative and serves as a means of control (of teachers, students and curriculum). This study explores the conceptual misunderstanding underlying the practice, its non-applicability and its continuing relevance in the context of Cameroon. A retrospective analysis of pre-and post-implementation data is made. Results indicate that the practice does not have any positive effects upon students' learning, as measured in the Ordinary Level GCE results of English Language, French Language and Mathematics. The study established that the practice is rooted in a profound misconception wherein assessment is seen as a separate activity from instruction since the practice officially puts teaching on hold and intermittently shuts down learning for six weeks. There is an apparent mismatch between system priorities and classroom assessment practices. It is logistically impractical to provide qualitative feedback in Cameroon. Sustained dedication and enthusiasm from teachers are lacking. Formative assessment is scarcely achievable in a high-stakes public examinations tradition like Cameroon. The study concludes that the practice is inhibited by conceptual and operational problems and recommends a sustained professional development framework for teachers and a reconceptualization of the practice with emphasis on teacher autonomy. The study finally cautions against imported "blueprints" and the peril of copying educational fads of developed countries.

**KEYWORDS:** *Assessment, feedback, learning outcomes*

## INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the school system in Cameroon has brought new challenges to ensure quality. Government's effort on access to schooling (Law No. 98/004 of April 1998) was not accompanied by any performance indicator framework for schooling. While thousands more Cameroonian children now attend school, far too many of them are not learning (EFA 2013/4 Global Monitoring Report). In analysing the "Learning Crisis", the EFA 2013/4 Global Monitoring Report asserts that only 45% of primary school children who reached grade four in Cameroon achieved reading standards. Much schooling has not been translated into gains in education or learning outcomes.

Poor quality education is jeopardizing the future of thousands of Cameroonian youths. Yet we do not know the full dimension of the learning crisis because measuring the learning achievement is very limited. The absence of a national data gap on learning poses a serious threat to the transformative power of education by making it impossible to tackle the most critical areas of need through evidence-based policy making.

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## The Sequential System of Assessment (SSA) in Cameroon

At the introduction of the Sequential System of Assessment (SSA) in Secondary Schools in Cameroon, it was presumed it would increase commitment by school administrators and teachers to the use of students' tests data in order to improve student learning and their own accountability for student learning.

The 36 weeks usually allocated for instruction in an academic year is divided into six (6) sequences. Each sequence is supposed to have a week for testing only. Throughout this time, teachers are obliged to administer test, mark and guarantee that the scores are forwarded to the School Principal who subsequently transmits a report to the Divisional Delegate for Secondary Education within a stipulated time frame. A class council is supposed to assess students' progress.

As a form of Continuous Assessment (CA), the SSA practice was introduced with the hope that it was going to enhance classroom instruction and student learning (Agborbechem & Frinwie, 2013)

### A Conceptual Misunderstanding

Assessment for learning or formative assessment is not new though they may not have been called by these names. Teachers have always checked out, in the course of their instruction, to understand students' thinking and learning. The need for assessment derives from the unpredictable relations between teaching and learning (William, 2011). Teacher instruction does not always lead to intended student learning, and consequently: *"It is only through assessment that we can find out whether a particular sequence of instructional activities has resulted in the intended learning outcomes"* (William, 2011).

At the conception of the Sequential System of Assessment (SSA), the initiators did not clearly articulate what they were seeking to achieve; Assessment of learning (summative) or Assessment for learning (formative). Apart from the ministerial circular drawing up the schedule for tests, no other document bearing instructions for implementation was provided.

The Sequential System in Cameroon does not consider assessment as an ongoing process. The practice isolates and considers assessment as a single exercise. This explains why teaching and learning is officially shut down during testing. The system is led by the needs of summative judgment, not learning. As a result of this arrangement, instructional time in secondary schools in Cameroon has been reduced by at least six weeks. The practice is continuous testing and not continuous assessment. Assessment is more than giving a test.

Instruction, learning and assessment are inseparably linked. The process of learning is as important as the end product. They must be concurrently planned and clearly rooted in specific learning goals. Formative assessment is informed by the constructivist learning principles, which hold that assessment should be an instrument to enhance both the students' learning and the teachers' knowledge of the students' current understanding. It is assumed that the practice of formative assessment is rooted in Bloom's concept of "mastery learning", an instructional approach that espouses the use of assessment to gauge students' progress toward mastery of learning goal (Bloom, Hastings and Madaus 1971). Bloom suggested that, rather than waiting to assess students at the end of the unit, (common practice at the time) teachers use assessment "as an integral part of the instructional process to identify individual learning difficulties and prescribe remediation procedures" (Gusky 2010). Formative assessment should be integrated into classroom plans and not imposed by a schedule on teachers. Teachers are no doubt expected to administer assessment in a variety of ways over time to allow them to observe multiple tasks and to collect information about levels of achievement. The period for assessment should be the time considered appropriate by individual teachers.

Formative assessment is highly "contingent" on the instructional situation and the student(s) ((Black & William, 2009). Thus, it should be tailored to the particular students being assessed, and at a specified point in the instructional process; also it should take the form most likely to elicit the desired learning evidence (Ruiz-Primo & Li, 2011). There should be no prescription for what a single instance of formative assessment should look like. Formative

assessment does not take the form of a particular instrument or task (Moss, 2008), but is defined by its purpose (Shepard, 2009), which is to help form, or shape, a student's learning during the learning process. Kellaghan & Greaney (2004) assert that formative assessment is subjective, informal, immediate, ongoing, and intuitive, as it interacts with learning as it occurs, monitoring student behaviour, scholastic performance, and responsiveness to instruction.

Monono & Foncha (2014) argue that when continuous assessment timetables are imposed on teachers who are obliged to forward students' scores within a given period rather than allowing teachers to administer test at the time they consider most appropriate in the course of the instruction, the merits of CA become disputed.

How education policy makers in Cameroon could introduce formative assessment at a national level is what is yet to be understood. A current review of the state of the field (Baird, Hopfenbeck, Newton, Stobart and Steen-Utheim, 2014) found 907 peer-reviewed articles and 481 conference proceedings on formative assessment. Fewer than 10 of these studies could be described as large scale, the vast majority being case studies in one or two schools with relatively few students.

Successful reforms in education usually require a systemic approach. The sequential System of Assessment needed a long-term approach. Time was needed for gradual adjustment, build local capacity, and gain support for the reforms especially from teachers. Time was also needed to solve implementation problems. Pilot testing is a key aspect in reforms. The task of applying concepts into practice is much more than a simple process of "translating" the findings of research into the classroom (Black & William, 1998). There are always difficulties involved in the implementation of formative assessment.

The outcome of this misconception is over-testing. Teaching time is taken off with the administrative burden of tests. Stress caused by over-testing turns children off education. Over-testing interrupts instruction and fragments learning into unrelated segments of information which hardly sum up to a coherent whole. The practice is counter-productive and an overload to teachers.

### Factors Inhibiting Formative Assessment in Cameroon

Apart from the conceptual misunderstanding of formative assessment in Cameroon, many factors hinder its effective implementation. Time and class size constitute practical barriers to the practice of formative assessment in Cameroon. In a study by Monono & Foncha (2014) some teachers reported having up to 600 students all put together across different levels. Shortage of time is recurrently cited in research on changing assessment practice (Torrence & Pryor, 2001). Duncan & Noonan (2007) argue for the importance of knowing how teachers' assessment strategies are influenced by types of classroom learning conditions (i.e class size and resources) Teachers believe that traditional forms of assessment are more time efficient and have more value because they serve summative requirements and accountability demands (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002; Mabry et al., 2003). There are worries that formative assessment demands too much class time to integrate and that it limits the amount of curriculum teachers can cover

within their programme (Morgan & Watson, 2002). Carles (2005) noted that teachers believed formative assessment is good in theory, but that it is not practical to implement especially within a context of competing curriculum demands. The large class size makes it logistically impossible to provide descriptive feedback in Cameroon.

Formative assessment requires additional skills that novice and poorly trained teachers do not always have (Bennett, 2011). According to Bailey and Heritage (2008), teachers need profound skills in: (1) content knowledge (2) knowledge of metacognition (3) pedagogic content knowledge (4) knowledge of students' previous learning and (5) assessment literacy to better understand the composite task of formative assessment. These aspects are evidently lacking in majority of secondary school teachers in Cameroon (Ndi, Foncha & Mbongo, 2014).

The dominance of summative assessment in the minds of education policy makers in Cameroon is too profound that it has thwarted all endeavors of formative assessment practices. There is an apparent misalignment between system priorities and classroom assessment practices. The system over stresses high-stakes externally developed certificate examinations, making teachers to be less enthusiastic about formative assessment. Teachers feel constraint by the current emphasis and priority the government of Cameroon places on certificate examinations, particularly due to lack of national assessments. Teachers are persuaded to focus on summative assessment as results from these assessments are used to communicate student achievement, form part of students' academic report and are used as a measure of teacher and school effectiveness. According to Gardner (2006) such misalignment is paradoxical because engaging formative assessment in classroom teaching and learning likely serves to enhance student achievement on summative assessment.

## The Problem

The introduction of the Sequential System of Assessment (SSA) was not accompanied by any quality assurance framework. The policy was not accompanied by clear measurable targets and a framework for the systematic review and monitoring to determine whether an acceptable standard of quality learning is being achieved over the medium term and enhanced in the long term. The practice is operational with no indicators to identify performance trends and signal areas in need of action and enable comparison of actual performance with established objectives. There was no prescribed minimum standard to be achieved at the end of each educational experience.

## Research Question

What is the impact of the introduction of the sequential system of assessment (SSA) in Cameroon on learning outcomes?

## Methodology

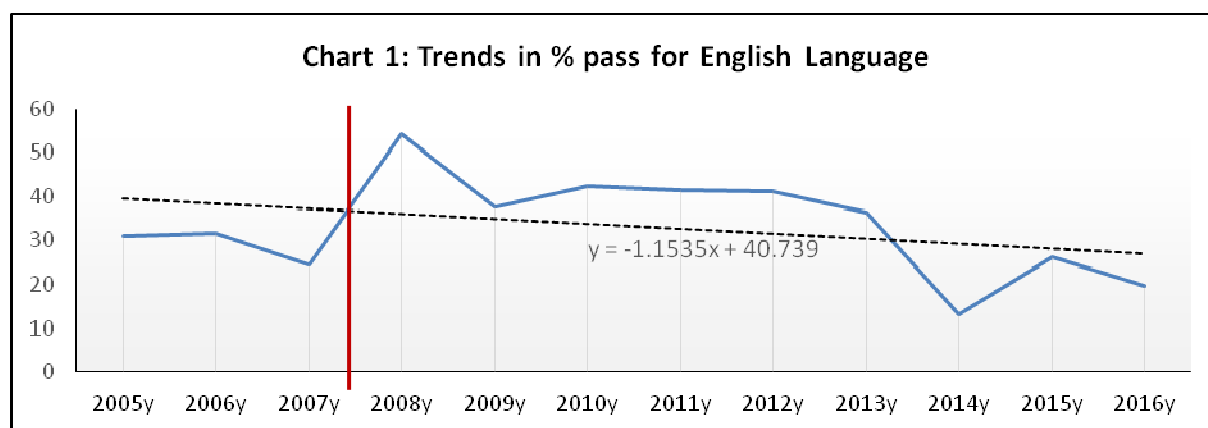
This study was carried out using the ex-post facto research design since there was no manipulation of the variables. The sample of candidates used in the study had already written the Cameroon GCE examinations and their results published. This is appropriate since the follow up is on groups with common characteristics (same syllabuses, duration of examination and similar conditions of study) (Cohen, Mansion and Morrison, 2000). It was a retrospective analysis of Ordinary Level GCE results statistics for candidate performances for three compulsory subjects (English Language, French Language and Mathematics). Two sets of data, for the years 2005-2008 and 2009-2016 were obtained to cover the period before and after the introduction of the Sequential System of Assessment (SSA) with a view to establishing if there is a recurrent pattern of improvement of performances between the retrospective set and the latter (Cohen, Mansion and Morrison, 2000).

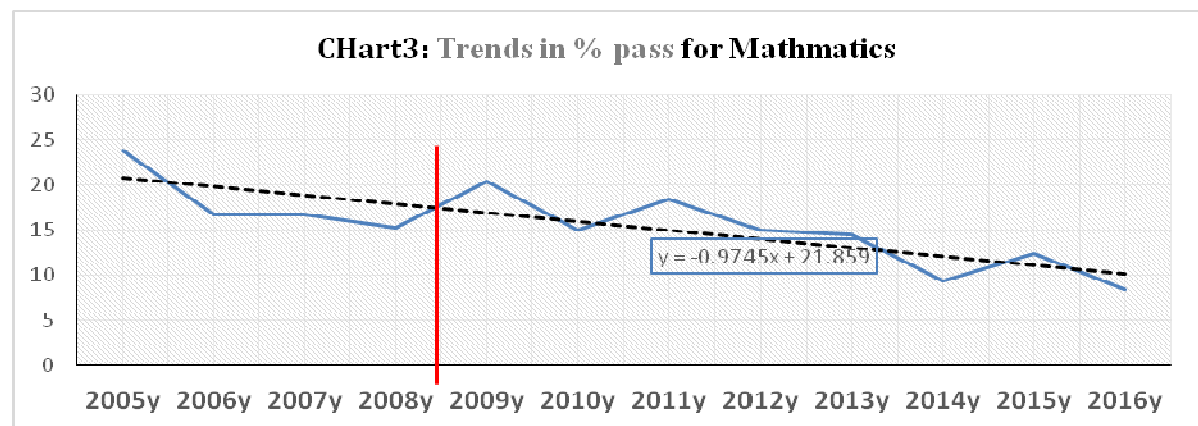
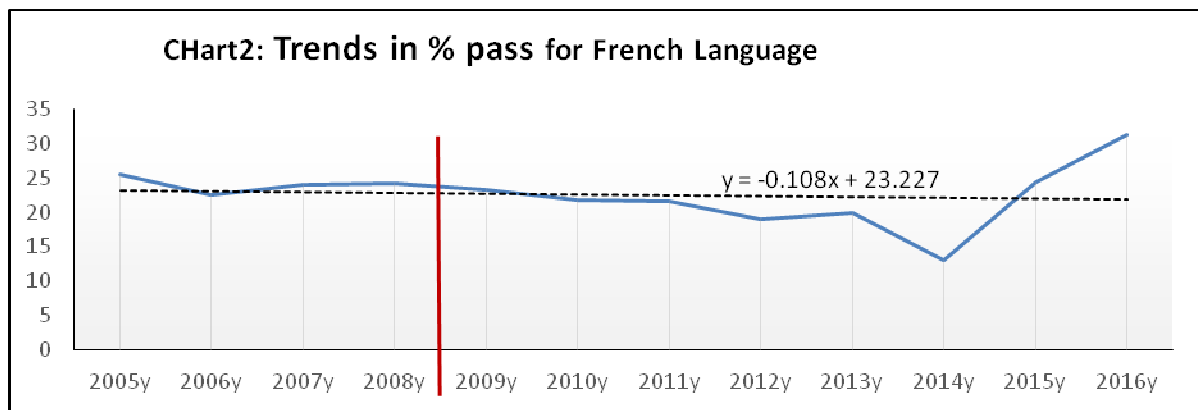
**Table 1: Trends in Candidate Performances at the GCE Ordinary Level examination from 2005 to 2016 in English Language, French Language and Mathematics**

Subject	Yearly Performances in % Pass											
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
English	30.9	31.5	24.4	54.3	37.6	42.2	41.5	41	36.5	13.2	26.2	19.6
French	25.4	22.6	24	24.2	23.2	21.8	21.5	19	20	13	24.4	31.2
Math	23.9	16.8	16.8	15.3	20.4	15	18.4	15	14.5	9.4	12.4	8.4

## Data Analysis

Data was analysed using visual inspection of the performance graphs (Kazdin, 1982), for changes across the retrospective years and those after the introduction of the SSA in schools, as well as for positive trends in student achievement.





### Findings

1. Close to a decade after the initiation of the practice of SSA, results in the above three subjects in Cameroon have been at their lowest level. This is in spite of the fact that English Language, French Language and Mathematics are assigned the highest number of hours of instructional time.
2. On the whole candidate performances in all three subjects have been on the decline as shown by the negative gradients of the results trend lines (-1.535, -0.1080 and -0.9745) for English Language, French Language and Mathematics respectively.
3. In particular, results for English Language and Mathematics have declined beyond the years before the introduction of the SSA (charts 1 and 3) that is from 30.9 % to 19.6 % and 25.4 % to 8.4 %
4. Performances in French Language also dropped for several years (2009- 2015 ) and only started changing in 2015.

### Implications for Policy Implementation

1. There is need for a reconceptualization of the Sequential System of Assessment in Secondary Schools in Cameroon with emphasis on teacher autonomy. There is no fixed procedure on how to adapt formative assessment to the needs of a particular classroom or student, but this adaptation is what good instruction demands of teachers. Therefore, the full burden of implementing formative assessment falls on the teacher. Formative assessment is contingent. The decisions as to the time and what format the assessment should take must be that of the teacher. The services of experts should be contracted to produce a manual for continuous assessment in the context of present schooling

2. Teachers are in the position to effect change in their use of assessment. Developing teachers' capacities for integrating different forms of assessments into their programming is, therefore, the most practicable way to enhance formative assessment in the classroom. Conducting formative assessment requires extensive knowledge of student learning, domains of study, assessment and pedagogy. The need for developing, implementing and scrutinizing professional development programmes in formative assessment to in- service and pre-service teachers is of necessity. The implementation of high quality formative assessment into classroom practice is a thorny process, therefore, teachers would need substantial support and large amount of time to be able to achieve a successful implementation of formative assessment.

Such professional development must be in the context within which teachers work in Cameroon. Job- embedded learning *"is based on the assumption that the most powerful learning is that which occurs in response to challenges currently being faced by the learner and that allows for immediate application, experimentation and adaptation on the job"* (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Job-embedded professional development links teacher learning to immediate and real life problems faced in the classroom. Rather than being an isolated event, usually taking place outside the school, professional development becomes integrated into teachers' daily work (Speck & Knipe, 2005).

### Concluding Remarks

Pritchett, ( 2010) unpacked the problems of reforms and policies in developing countries in what he calls "isomorphic mimicry"; building institutions and frameworks in weak states that look like those found in functional states. "They pretend to do reforms that look like the kind of reforms that successful countries do, but without their core underlying functionalities" Pritchett added.



The sequential system of assessment in Cameroon is an adoption of “international best practices” without the practice; the negative consequences of imported blueprint. We are inclined to imitating other successful institutions without actually developing the functionality of the institutions we are copying from. Reforms in education are context specific. The pedagogical and educational problems of the developed countries are entirely different from what we encounter. The first step to success is the approval of failure. The sequential system in Cameroon has failed. Close to a decade after the start of the practice, achievement levels have relatively remained low. While the study does not cling to the sequential system of assessment as being responsible for the learning crisis, the study formulates that the misapplication of the concept of formative assessment only added to the crisis.

That there is a learning crisis in Cameroon is beyond argument- and it demonstrates the utter insufficiency of current provisions, policies and practices. The learning crisis is one that grows with each additional child that walks through the classroom door in Cameroon. Many children in those classes are learning very little. Many are learning only a small fraction of the syllabus. The learning crisis is both deep and wide. By virtue of the findings, many children leave school knowing they are failures. Strengthening the focus on student learning outcomes goes further than the simple altering of established structures and practices; it entails a paradigm shift in philosophy, policies and practice.

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