

# The Namibian Portfolio for Languages: A tool for formative assessment in Namibian Secondary Schools

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## Abstract

*The notion of learner-centred education has received praise since its inception in the Namibian education system in the early 1990s. This development provided a need for restructuring the process of teaching-learning, the nature of the curriculum, materials and assessment. The Education for All document similarly advocates for the regulation of formative assessment since the early years of the new Namibia. Little evidence suggests that the practical integration of formative assessment has not been concretely defined. In a learner-centred approach, formative assessment is crucial. Whereas it can be generally accepted that formative assessment is at the core of assessment in most language classrooms, it remains unclear whether assessment is more summative than formative. While learners' marks are indicative of summative assessment, there is no tool to form the basis for the implementation of formative assessment and teacher feedback on their learners' formative assessment. A team of teachers of French as a foreign language in Namibia viewed the introduction of a portfolio for languages as a practical tool for teachers and learners in order to implement formative assessment. This paper presents the use of the Namibian Portfolio for Languages as a pedagogical tool for self-assessment.*

## Background

Education in Namibia has seen major reforms during two periods of significance: pre- and post-colonial era. Before independence, as Shilongo (2004) reports, education was carefully designed to advance the ideals of colonialism, division and segregation. Education was more teacher-centred and relied more on traditional teaching methods. The preamble of *Toward Education for All* (1993), which is one of the first post-independence educational policy documents, acknowledges that:

Schooling in this country was once the privilege of the few. [...] Initially, education for Black Namibians was justified in terms of its vocational utility. [...] Except for a very small number of people [...] basic literacy and numeracy was deemed sufficient. [...] most Namibians were limited to a few years of primary education that in general functioned to reinforce their subordinate role. (*Towards Education for All*, p.2)

Shortly after independence, education actors and leaders devoted themselves to rebuild a new education system based on four priorities: access, equity, quality and democracy. To reach these broad, yet essential objectives, chapter seven of the said document reveals intended programmes, activities and teaching methods.

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The teaching methods section is short, though explicit. Firstly, authors reject the pre-independence method privileging memorising and repeating knowledge and teaching, and they opt instead for the learner-centred approach. The concept is repeatedly cited throughout the policy document, and in detail, in the following extract:

The starting point is the learners' existing knowledge, skills, interests and understanding, derived from previous experience in and out of school; the natural curiosity and eagerness of all young people to learn to investigate and to make sense of a widening world must be nourished and encouraged by challenging and meaningful tasks; the learners' perspective needs to be appreciated and considered in the work of school; learners must be empowered to think and take responsibility not only for their own, but also for one another's learning and total development; and learners should be involved as partners in, rather than receivers of, educational growth. (Towards Education for All, p. 60).

Authors add that these directives should be complemented by learner-friendly teaching materials and that teaching methods "must allow for the active involvement and participations of learners in the learning-process" (*Ibid.*).

Ten years later, the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) published a conceptual framework on *The Learner-centred Education in the Namibian Context*. The framework document answered the dissatisfaction on the review of the implementation of the learner-centred approach in the Namibian classrooms. Authors argued that the implementation of the learner-centred approach was lacking consistency throughout the system and they pointed out the practitioners' need of clarification on the 'learner-centred' concept, and of "a better understanding of what it involves". Authors admitted that for the past 10 years, the 'learner-centred' principles had been inconsistent in schools, and sometimes misinterpreted. The framework reveals that teachers had "insufficient depth understanding of learner-centred education to be able to implement it" (NIED, 2003, p.34). The conceptual Framework first redefines the learner-centred principles insisting on learners and teachers' roles, and ends with a practical chapter on the 'implications' of a learner-centred approach according to different aspects. Indeed, a transformation of a teaching "approach" affects many areas of the teaching and learning environment.

Authors state that assessment is usually a controversial component of any educational transformation (*Ibid.*, p.36). In the chapter dedicated to the 'Implications for assessment and evaluation', the framework explains that the examination system in Namibian schools "has not freed itself entirely from the former concept of the encyclopaedic curriculum and a narrower range of skills than the curriculum as a whole, because of the dependency of the written examination." (*Ibid.*, p.36) In the view of the authors, there is an unfortunate inadequacy in the Namibian educational system in which a learner-centred curriculum and a behaviourist assessment system are meant to cohabit. Nevertheless, they claim that "in order to be more consistent in a learner-centred approach, greater weight needs to be given to classroom-based continuous assessment, but that assessment must also be valid and reliable". They conclude by stating that "the challenge is for curricula to define and limit assessment and examination, for teachers to be well trained in understanding what learning is intended to take place and to be able to access that consistently and authentically, and to have a high level of assessment literacy." (*Ibid.*, p.38)

Between 2009 and 2012, Zannier conducted an analysis on the didactic needs of teachers of French in Namibia. Results revealed that teachers did include some learner-centred techniques in their assessment activities; the most frequent being peer assessment. But teachers gave hesitant definitions, once questioned about "formative assessment" and

“self-assessment”. Eventually, they found difficult relating the notions to their teaching activities or practice. Among the research recommendations, Zannier suggested more in-service training on the ‘learner-centred’ subject for teachers, and the production of Namibian pedagogical materials helping learners and teachers to implement a learner-centred approach in Namibian classrooms. This recommendation was accepted as not only addressing learners’ needs in a learner-centred education system, but also that it is catering for the learning context of learners.

It is against this background that, in 2012, a team of five teachers of French (composed of two lecturers from the University of Namibia and three teachers from secondary schools) started the project of conceptualising a Namibian Portfolio for Languages (NPL) for learners enrolled in French as a foreign language (FFL). In 2013, around 300 Grade 8 learners from 7 schools from Khomas and Oshana regions received a NPL.

### **Continuous and formative assessment: What is the status quo in Namibia?**

With the education reform, teaching became more learner-centred, but the nature of assessment remained focused on the summative type of assessment with little focus on formative assessment. Ketabi and Ketabi (2014) define summative assessment as a summary of a student’s accumulated competencies at the end of a learning term; while formative assessment is viewed as taking place during the learning process. Whereas summative assessment is designed to primarily dictate student progression to the next grade, formative assessment is designed to identify a student’s weaknesses and strengths. Summative assessment determines whether a student has attained the necessary prerequisite competencies to proceed to the next level or grade. Formative assessment, on the other hand, if employed periodically, can enhance learning (Norman, Neville, Blake & Mueller, 2010). Nonetheless, there is no argument that either type of assessment is more important than the other.

Assessment in Namibian schools is regulated by the *Towards Improving CA in Schools* (MBEC, 1999) guide. While the guide outlines the procedures and guidelines on summative assessment, limited information is provided on formative assessment. The guide prescribes the nature and frequency of summative assessment, but mentions formative assessment under the continuous assessment section from a summative assessment view. It thus leaves a room for confusion on the use of formative assessment in schools by teachers.

Nonetheless, the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1999) correctly classifies continuous assessment as formative assessment (p.8). Continuous assessment is a collection of marks in the different competencies in a subject recorded during different periods in an academic year. For this reason, it can thus be accepted that continuous assessment can also be classified as summative assessment. *The Dictionnaire de didactique en Français* (2003, pp. 90-92) defines summative assessment as any evaluation that provides an assessment on the degree of mastery of a specific competency during a particular period or at the end of a study programme, with the objective of classification, evaluation of progress or with intention of verifying the efficacy of a programme or subject at the end of a unit, chapter or semester. Continuous assessment can be said to be summative when its objectives are to rate a learner’s performance according to a class rank or to form part of the end of course mark determining progression to the next level. It can, however, be classified as formative when its objectives are to determine progression, evolutions, improvements (etc.) in a learner’s competencies as opposed to performance.

Formative assessment is a process of continuous assessment serving to guide learners in their school work, to identify their weaknesses and to give them a means to help them to progress in their learning. It is oriented towards immediate pedagogical assistance and is

linked to continuous evaluation to bring about an effective remedial and corrective teaching (*Dictionnaire de didactique en Français*, 2003, p. 91). In light of this definition, it raises the question of whether the current way of continuously assessing learners in Namibian schools conforms to the mentioned objectives of formative assessment.

As with the *Framework of Learner-centred Approach in the Namibian Context* (2003), the *Dictionnaire de didactique en Français* (2003) explains that an authentic assessment is necessary to have a reliable assessment by authentic, understood in both referred documents as assessing learners on their abilities in contextualised situations of daily life. It is based on the assessment of the knowledge of the subject, but also on the learners' ability to mobilise cognitive and metacognitive strategies to realise tasks and the degree of the learners' ability to use what they already learnt. This means that, in languages, continuous assessment is much broader than what is currently assessed in Namibia. Common examples of tools used for formative assessment, include observations by teachers and parents, self-assessment grids and individual reviews such as portfolios.

As Klenowski, Askew and Carnell (2007) views, the potential use of portfolios for summative assessment and development of teaching and reflective practice has received attention in the literature on assessment, there is a need to explore insights into how a portfolio for learning can be used as a formative assessment tool to develop understanding of an individual's own learning, assessment and professional practices. This view is supported by Dunn and Sean (2009), who argue that there is evidence supporting the improvement of educational outcomes through the use of formative assessment. It is on this basis that it can be hypothesised that the implementation of the language portfolio in classrooms can improve learner performance in Namibian classrooms.

### **Implementing the NPL as a formative assessment tool**

The conceptualisation of the NPL was largely inspired by the European Portfolio for Languages (EPL), which was published by the European Council in 2001. Its aims were to support formative assessment in foreign languages by proposing self-assessment. Similarly, the NPL was conceived as a material that can help teachers and learners to implement formative assessment in their teaching-learning practice. However, in a learner-centred approach, the authors of the NPL deliberately adapted the EPL in order to cater for specific needs of learners in a Namibian context, taking into account the curriculum, defined topics, Namibian cultural reference and diversity, and others.

In the definition of continuous assessment methods section of the *Framework for Learner Centred Education in Namibia* (2003), a portfolio is equated to a repository of a learner's best productions (i.e. tests, essays, etc.).

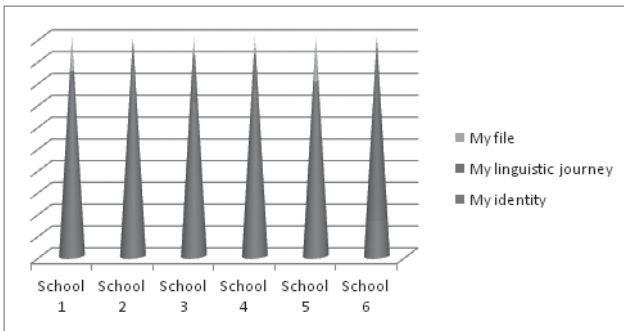
Portfolio: a product continuous assessment which requires a learner to collect a limited selection of the learner's work that is used to either present the learner's best work(s) or to demonstrate the learner's educational growth over a given time span (p. 44).

In contrast, the EPL's assessment objectives are much broader. A portfolio is viewed as document presenting positive evidence of various acquisitions in the subject that is updated as regularly as possible, including learner self-assessment and discussions with the teacher (*Dictionnaire de didactique en Français*, 2003, p. 197). With objective of creating a learner-centred document, the NPL conformed more to the EPL's definition of a portfolio. Consequently, teachers were expected to face challenges implementing the NPL in their classrooms, necessitating the authors of the NPL to provide a sensitisation workshop to all teachers of French in Namibia.

The NPL was designed to appeal to the learner’s interest and is presented in two languages: English and French. A Namibian designer provided the design and layout within the Namibian socio-cultural context. The NPL has three chapters: My Identity, My linguistic Journey and my File. The first chapter is designed to get information on the learner’s identity and likes, school, environment and activities. The second chapter is the self-assessment part which requires the learners to assess themselves according to the different Namibian curriculum competencies, across the different grades (8 to 12). The third chapter, on the other hand, is more equivalent to the prescribed definition of a ‘portfolio’: it is a file where learners can store their best productions.

In view of the implementation of the NPL in Namibian schools in 2013, a follow-up study was conducted in 2014. Preliminary results show that the NPL fulfilled the learner-centred objectives pertaining to design, topics, and readability. The findings on the formative assessment of the NPL are still being analysed, since there is need for a longer time frame.

From the study, two questions of the questionnaire and two questions from the interviews related to formative assessment were selected for discussion in this paper. When these data were analysed, results showed that each school had differently used the three chapters of the NPL; all schools had abundantly worked on the activities proposed in “My Identity”. The chapter III, “My file” was generally not started. It is thus quite logical that the chapter III related to the portfolio section might require a longer time to be compiled by learners. But it is more surprising that the chapter II, dedicated to self-assessment, was also not worked on. At the time of data collection, the NPL had been implemented in schools between 6 months and 2 years. That given period was enough to start the self-assessment section with the classes. Three schools out of six admitted to have just started working on chapter II, dedicated to self-assessment. However, one private school deliberately focused on the self-assessment section from the NPL implementation. It is the only school which placed the chapter II, “My Linguistic Journey” as its favorite (School 6 on Figure 1).

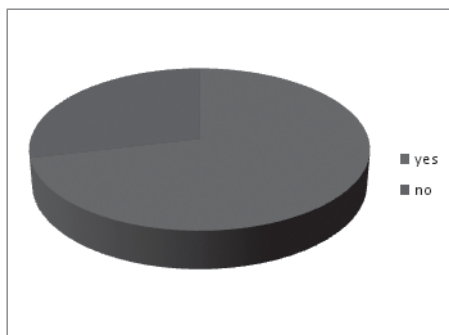


**Figure 1:** Question: “What was your favorite chapter?”

Chapter 2 of the NPL, “My linguistic Journey”, was specifically designed as a tool for formative assessment in the French language. To achieve this goal, the chapter had to provide three key aspects: to give learners a visibility on the syllabus outcomes, to invite learners to self-assess themselves and to engage teachers and learners in dialogue on progresses in the language.

Question 10 in the questionnaire asked learners if chapter 2 helped them to understand what was expected from them in the French subject, in relation to their grade. 84 % of the total population answered that the “Linguistic Journey” was really useful in order to see the objectives to be reached in each competence in the French language.

Question 11, on the other hand, directly asked learners if the act of self-assessment helped them understand better their strengths and weaknesses in French. As shown by figure 2, up to 70 % of the population strongly felt that the self-assessment helped them situate themselves in the language. This percentage would be higher if all schools had worked more on the chapter.



**Figure 2:** Question 11 “Do you think that by self-assessing yourself in the section 2, you understand better your strengths and weaknesses in French?”

Additionally, data from the interviews revealed that learners were feeling “great” and “proud” to self-assess themselves. They enjoyed it because “now I know my weak and strong points” or “assessing myself helps me to understand French better and easier”. Another argued that “It helps me to track my progress; I look back and see how far I am.”

As a means to test the last NPL conceivers’ objective, a question was asked during interviews, whether teachers guide and provide feedback on learners’ progress based on the NPL use and figures. Results from the interviewed sample show that teachers assisted learners not only on how to use the NPL, but also on individual progress. With the second phase of the NPL assessment orientated on teachers’ point of view on the NPL, these results will be compared with those of learners.

## **Conclusion**

The introduction of the NPL in Namibian schools presents a refined perspective to the definition of formative assessment. While existing policy documents are more explicit on the nature and frequency of summative assessment, formative assessment is implicitly regulated. The NPL provides an opportunity for the integration of self-assessment as a formative assessment tool, increasing teacher-learner interactions and learner self-reflection. Finally, in view of learners’ positive response to Chapter II of the NPL, it can be concluded that the notion of self-assessment, if effectively implemented using contemporary communicative pedagogical tools, might enhance learner motivation.

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