



Myths of Competency-Based Assessment: What it is and What it is not

Aanchal Chomal

The focus on assessment reforms in the National Policy on Education (NEP) 2020 is not new. However, the emphasis on ongoing holistic assessments is at odds with the prioritisation of indicators such as enrolment, attendance, infrastructure gaps, and expenditure tracking. In that context, ideas like competency-based learning and assessment can seem distant from day-to-day governance concerns. This article identifies and addresses myths related to competency-based assessment. It put forth the case that this approach necessitates shifts in pedagogy and classroom practices right from the foundational stage, and is therefore critical for assuring quality education.

Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) has become a buzzword in the last few years. Boards across the country are incorporating competency-based questions in their Classes 10 and 12 certification examinations. In response, teachers across school systems are attempting to align their teaching to what is perceived as a

changed mandate. Students, too, are often heard expressing anxiety that their final examination will now be ‘more competency-based’.

In engagement with teachers and school leaders across various schools, one encounters a range of perceptions about what CBA means, and how students should be ‘prepared’ for it. This article attempts to surface some of the common myths around CBA and, in doing so, outline key principles for understanding what CBA is—and what it is not.

[Myth1- Competency-Based Assessment is a new pattern of board examination paper](#)

Following the assessment reforms proposed in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS 2022) and School Education (NCF-SE 2023), respectively, one of the earliest visible changes introduced by boards was a shift away from rote-based questions towards competency-based ones. Boards such as the Central Board of Secondary Education

(CBSE) led this change, and several others followed. While these reforms were well-intentioned, their immediate manifestation in examination blueprints and circulars led many stakeholders—teachers, parents, and schools—to interpret CBA as a change in the format of board examination papers.

Over time, this perception was reinforced as boards began specifying the percentage of competency-based questions to be included in examinations. As a result, competency-based assessment came to be seen largely as an examination reform rather than a deeper shift in teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

Myth 2- Competency-Based Assessment is relevant only at secondary grades

Closely linked to the first myth is the belief that CBA begins only in Classes 9 and 10. This has led to disproportionate emphasis on CBA at the secondary stage, while assessment in the foundational, preparatory, and middle stages continues to be largely content-driven. This stage-specific understanding of CBA is a direct outcome of viewing competencies primarily through the lens of board examinations.



Myth 3- Competency-Based Assessment only addresses higher-order thinking

Another widespread view is that CBA is concerned only with higher-order thinking skills such as application, analysis, and reasoning. As a result, foundational cognitive capacities—such as the ability to identify, describe, explain, or illustrate concepts—are often seen as outside the scope of CBA. This narrow interpretation overlooks the role of conceptual understanding as a critical component of competence.

Myth 4- Competency-Based Assessment is a western idea and requires specialised training

Taken together, these myths have led many stakeholders to believe that CBA is a Western import that can be designed and implemented only by boards or specialised institutions. It is often perceived as a new and technically complex idea, disconnected from earlier policy thinking in India.

At the heart of these misconceptions lies a limited engagement with the idea of competencies and with what it truly means to assess them. The current confusion also serves as a reminder that assessment reforms, when introduced without corresponding shifts in pedagogy and classroom practice, are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes. Similar patterns were observed during the introduction of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) alongside the No Detention Policy.

So, what does competency-based assessment really mean? How does one understand the meaning of competencies as articulated in the National Curriculum Frameworks published post NEP 2020?

Unpacking the meaning of competencies and competency-based assessment

As articulated in the NCF-SE 2023, competencies are learning achievements that are observable and can be assessed systematically. They are subject specific and stage specific, and learners are expected to attain proficiency in them over three to four years of schooling.



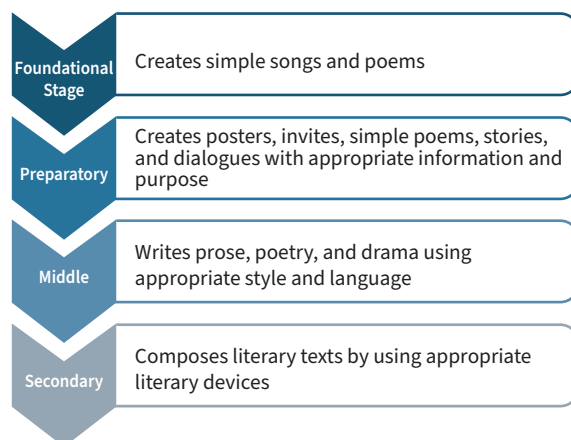
In everyday practice, teachers often understand competency in a more generic sense - as the ability to perform something with enough dexterity - like writing an essay, solving a mathematics problem, conducting an experiment, and playing a sport. Such competence stems from an integration of knowledge, skills/abilities, attitudes, behaviour, or characteristics required to perform that task effectively. In school education globally, competencies have often been articulated as broad capacities like critical thinking, problem solving or creative thinking.

However, the competencies listed in the NCF-FS 2022 and NCF-SE 2023 mark a significant shift. These competencies are

disciplinary in nature, that is, they are rooted in the curricular areas that learners engage with in schools. They embody core conceptual understanding, subject-specific ways of thinking and working, and the dispositions that education seeks to nurture over time.

Competencies in classroom contexts

Consider the example of language learning. In many classrooms, language teaching has traditionally focused on memorising the content of prescribed textbooks- stories, poems, plays. The competencies articulated across stages, however, foreground a different expectation: the ability to express, compose, create, and communicate meaningfully across contexts and modes.



Competencies across stages

Here, the role of textbooks is not to be mastered as content in themselves, but to provide exposure to forms, genres, and styles that enable learners to engage deeply with texts – drawing meaning, interpreting ideas, and eventually composing their own oral and written work. These competencies are developed progressively over several years, not within a single unit or academic year.

For teachers, this underscores the importance of understanding subject competencies while designing lesson plans and classroom tasks. Without a shift from

content-focused pedagogy to competency-focused teaching–learning processes, merely changing assessment formats will not result in meaningful CBA. This directly challenges the notion that CBA is only a change in examination patterns. It also addresses the misconception that competencies are relevant only at the secondary stage; in the current curriculum frameworks, competencies are clearly articulated across all stages and subjects.

Progression within competencies

A defining feature of competencies is their coherent progression across stages. For instance, in social science, a competency in the middle-stage may require students to explain key natural phenomena and their spatial distribution, while at the secondary stage, students are expected to draw interlinkages between components of the physical environment. This progression reflects increasing conceptual depth and disciplinary engagement rather than a simple increase in difficulty.

Competencies also show progression within a stage. Learners move from identifying, describing, and explaining concepts to analysing relationships, applying ideas to real-life contexts, and eventually generating explanations or solutions. These forms of understanding—often dismissed as “lower order”—are, in fact, essential foundations for more complex thinking. Recognising this progression helps dispel the myth that competency-based assessment focuses only on higher-order skills.

For teachers, engaging meaningfully with CBA requires attention to this developmental trajectory. Classroom tasks must be designed to scaffold learners along this continuum, while generating sufficient evidence to understand where students are in their learning.

Middle

C-2.1 Recognises elements of the continued prevalence of certain beliefs, relationships, practices, and activities in human society, notwithstanding major changes in society.

C-6.1 Explains key natural phenomena such as climate, weather, ocean cycles, soil formation, the flow of rivers, and how they are spatially distributed .

C-8.1 Understands the need for a constitution for any country during the last few centuries – especially in a country such as India – and its deeper objectives

Secondary

C-1.3 Traces aspects of continuity and change in different phases of history across the Indian subcontinent (including cultural trends, social and religious trends and reforms, and economic and political transformations)

C-4.3 Draws inter-linkages between various components of the physical environment, such as climate and relief, climate and vegetation, vegetation, and wildlife

C-5.1 Understands that the Indian Constitution draws from the great cultural heritage and common aspirations of the Indian nation, and recalls India’s early experiments with democracy (assemblies in Mahajanapadas, kingdoms and empires at several levels of the society, guilds, sanghas and ganas, village councils and committees, Uthiramerur inscriptions

C-7.2 Evaluates the importance of the three sectors of production (primary, secondary, and tertiary) in any country’s economy, especially India

Role of formative assessment and evidence

Attainment of competencies cannot be reliably captured through a single assessment event. The phrase “assessed systematically” in the definition of competencies is crucial

here. Competencies need to be broken down into grade-appropriate milestones and assessed over time using multiple methods.

Formative assessment practices—such as purposeful questioning, worksheets, observation of group work, student discussions, and classroom tasks—play a central role in generating evidence of learning. These everyday practices allow teachers to notice progress, identify gaps, and adjust instruction, making CBA an integral part of teaching rather than an additional burden.

In essence, competencies are closely aligned with the curricular aims of each subject and are nested within broader curricular goals. Unless educators clearly see this relationship between subject aims, curricular goals, competencies, and classroom practice, competency-based assessment is unlikely to be implemented meaningfully.



Multiple methods of assessment needed for effective competency-based assessment

Given the nature of competencies, no single assessment method can capture them fully. A range of tools and processes is

required to build a reliable picture of student learning over time. Many such methods, such as projects, portfolios, rubrics, and performance tasks, are already familiar to teachers and widely used in schools.

The challenge, therefore, is not the introduction of new tools, but their alignment with subject competencies. Seen in this way, CBA is neither a new concept nor does it require specialised technical expertise. Rather, it is part of sustained efforts over the past few decades to improve educational quality through clearer articulation of learning standards, sound pedagogical principles, and appropriate assessment approaches. Understanding these underlying ideas is key to practicing competency-based assessment effectively.

Concluding comments

Transitioning from content-based teaching-learning and assessment to a competency-based approach is neither simple nor immediate. It requires a fundamental shift in stakeholder perspectives of what is worth learning in schools, how teaching is organised and how evidence of learning is gathered and used. To make this transition, **competencies must be understood** comprehensively by all key stakeholders.

Competency-based assessment cannot be achieved through a one-time change in examination patterns. It demands sustained attention to nurturing competencies through everyday classroom practice, supported by multiple assessment methods and ongoing formative feedback. Both formative and summative assessments need to be deliberately designed to elicit meaningful evidence of student learning. Periodic consolidation of this evidence will give us a sense of our students' progress in these competencies.

Seen in this context, CBA is best understood not as an isolated assessment reform, but as

part of a long-term systemic effort to align curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment—so that learning, rather than testing, remains at the centre of the education system. Seeing

CBA in continuity, and in the context of the larger education reforms, becomes quite critical to enable this approach to unfold effectively on ground.



Aanchal Chomal heads the Assessment team and is an Associate Professor at the School of Continuing Education and University Resource Centre (SCE-URC), Azim Premji University. Her work focuses on student assessment, teacher evaluation, and strengthening assessment systems in school education.