The Value of Positive Feedback and Ongoing Needs Analysis in the Process of Formative Assessment

Abstract

To make the teaching-learning process feasible a teacher should start by creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom at the outset of each course in order to enable its participants to express their attitudes and opinions freely. The course should start with clearly specified goals or outcomes of the whole learning process, preceded by detailed needs’ and expectations’ analysis. Moreover, a teacher should be willing to change or adapt both the framework of the course and the methods of working to the needs of each group as a whole and its individual members – expressed not only at the beginning of the course but also at its later stages. To reinforce students’ activity in- and outside the classroom positive feedback from the teacher is necessary. In this type of feedback weaknesses are to be considered as areas of improvement, rather than “problematic” ones. While implementing student-centered approach, a teacher should also develop a culture of inclusion, cooperation and mutual respect, aimed at continuous improvement. For this reason, they have to be always ready to rethink and redesign their teaching strategies and syllabuses and willing to give “another chance” to those students who are prepared to work towards enhancing their skills and knowledge.

Key words: positive feedback, inclusion, cooperation, continuous improvement, progress

1. Introduction

At present education is a lifelong process. It means that, in order to survive and thrive in a contemporary society, each citizen has to be able to continue their education throughout the entirety of their lives. Therefore, schools should be able to prepare each student for this process by providing them not only with content knowledge, but, to begin with: a whole range of skills which will make their lifelong learning feasible and successful. For this reason, the use of summative assessment, which is understood as the assessment of learning, is not
sufficient, as it is past-oriented and, as such, does not stimulate future learning just as it is the case of formative assessment.

The following paper defines the notion of assessment, distinguishing between summative and formative assessment. Then the need of formative assessment in contemporary education is stressed, together with the necessity of ongoing needs’ analysis and the role of feedback, especially its positive form.

The final part presents a a positive classroom. In such a classroom students, with their potential, needs and expectations, are at the center of teacher’s attention. The main two characteristics of the educational process taking place in such a classroom are its positive atmosphere and inclusion. Each student is expected to peacefully coexist and cooperate with others while developing and continuously improving their own skills and knowledge. What is more, students are rewarded for sharing their achievements and ideas with others.

The role of a teacher in such a classroom cannot be underestimated. They are expected to stimulate the process of learning by using two main mechanisms: ongoing needs’ analysis and positive feedback. Thanks to the first one there is a chance that the content offered by the teacher as well as methods of teaching will correspond with the students’ expectations. The second one, in turn, allows the teacher to concentrate their assessment on positive results obtained by their students and thus stimulate the process of continuous improvement in the classroom and, hopefully, in lifelong learning, too.

2. Defining assessment

Assessment has been defined in a number of ways, depending on the dictionary. Oxford dictionary specifies it very broadly as “the action of assessing someone or something”\(^1\). Cambridge dictionary, in turn, defines assessment as “the act of judging or deciding the amount, value, quality, or importance of something, or the judgment or decision that is made”\(^2\). Continuous assessment, in turn, is considered as “the evaluation of a pupil's progress throughout a course of study, as distinct from by examination.”\(^3\) Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam state that “We use the general term assessment to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers -- and by their students in assessing themselves -- that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such

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\(^1\) [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/assessment](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/assessment).


\(^3\) [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/continuous_assessment](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/continuous_assessment).
assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs.” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 2).

Apart from teacher’s assessment of a student, there is also: self-assessment, peer assessment. Thus assessment is not only the privilege and task of a teacher. On the contrary, the situation can be reversed, with students evaluating their teacher’s activities, their colleagues and themselves. Thanks to this multi-directional process both the students and their teacher can hope to obtain their common goal, which is: successful educational process, provided that they stick to the rules and strive at achieving better and better results by continuously modifying and thus: improving various elements of this process.

In this paper the author understands assessment as a continuous process of student’s achievement evaluation. The word “achievement” is used here to stress the fact, that every single student achieves some positive results in the process of education. These results vary from student to student, depending on the strengths characterizing each of them. A positively-minded teacher should not only be able to discover these USPs (unique selling points) in every student, but also use them as building blocks in their construction of successful teams, able to achieve common educational goals.

3. Summative versus formative assessment

The origins of the phrase “formative assessment” go back to the 1970s. Michael Scriven (1967) was the first to make a distinction between summative and formative assessment. According to him summative evaluation provided information to judge the overall value of an educational program while formative evaluation was targeted at facilitating program improvement. (compare: (Scriven, 1967, p. 41). Two years later Benjamin S. Bloom (1969) stated that the aim of summative evaluation was to judge what the learner had achieved at the end of a course or program, while formative evaluation was to “provide feedback and correctives at each stage in the teaching-learning process.” Summative assessment is usually defined as “the process of assessment leads to summative assessment, that is, a judgement which encapsulates all the evidence up to a given point. This point is seen as a finality at the point of the judgement. A summative assessment can have various functions which do not impinge on the process.” (Taras, 2005). Formative assessment is understood as “information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner’s thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning.” (Shute, 2007).

The simple explanation of the distinction between these two types of assessment is that formative assessment is assessment for learning while summative assessment is
understood as assessment of learning. The author of this paper is of the opinion that both summative and formative assessment are indispensable elements of broadly understood ongoing process of students’ evaluation.

4. The need for formative assessment

The need for formative assessment in the 21st century context cannot be underestimated. It is of key importance at all stages of education, making it more efficient, less time-consuming, more rewarding and meaningful. Thanks to it the learner’s experience is more personalized, unique and valuable for each individual. What is more, teachers are not only responsible for the process of learning taking place in “their” classroom. They also have to prepare their students for the lifelong learning process which will enable them to perform successfully both in their professional and personal context.

To be successful participants in the process students have to understand the process of learning and be able to control it and reflect on it themselves. To make crucial decisions concerning their professional career as well as the simple ones about everyday tasks and activities they themselves should be able to give answers to the whole set of “wh-questions”, such as: What activities do I have to undertake to further my professional career? How will I do it? When is the best time for me to start working on it?, etc. Summative assessment alone would not prepare them for this lifelong, continuous process of learning which they have to manage on their own, without the help of a teacher.

5. The role of feedback in assessment process

In order to be able to evaluate the role of feedback in the assessment process a teacher needs to be aware of what is and what is not feedback. In this review, the author uses the definition provided by Hattie and Temperley who specify feedback as: “information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding.” (Hattie & Temperley, 2007, p.81). Thus, feedback is a very broad notion, covering a variety of responses, both oral and written, verbal and/or non-verbal, etc., to a wide range of (all) tasks completed by students. In the educational process a teacher is not a monopolist in this area, as feedback can also be provided by peers, educational materials (e.g. computer programs) as well as the learners themselves – reflecting on their activities in the classroom.

It is an important element of an ongoing process of communication between a teacher and their students; providing effective feedback is a particularly demanding task for the teacher, as
it requires a high level of attention to be paid to all activities taking place during the educational process. What is more, such feedback should provide answers to a whole range of “wh-questions”, such as:

- What was right / wrong
- Which mistakes are more / less serious
- How can I correct them
- Where can I find information to help me improve my skills / knowledge
- Who could help me in this process
- When can I correct this task (giving students second chances)
- Why should I at all do it (especially if it is not a “fail”, yet), etc.

Feedback should not, however, only concern the activities undertaken by a student so far, but, more importantly, it ought to stimulate the process of learning. Therefore, formative assessment plays such a huge role in the educational process, as assessment for learning.

Below “a model of feedback to enhance learning” is presented. This model was designed by Hattie and Temperley in 2007. It presents the importance of feedback in the process of narrowing the gap between the present state of knowledge and /or skills and the state targeted at by a teacher. The element which seems to be especially valuable in the 21st century education is the authors’ conviction that both a teacher and their students can undertake activities aimed at diminishing this gap. The teacher – by preparing clear, well-specified but also demanding goals and facilitating their accomplishment, and the students – by working hard and devising strategies to obtain these goals. While providing their students with effective feedback a teacher combines the presently defined perspectives with the future goals and aspirations. This way a teacher makes their students aware of the fact that the roots of the future success are in their present efforts and activities.

This idea is even more clearly visible in the final part of the model, where the four levels of feedback are presented: from the “understanding the task” level towards comprehending the more complicated idea of “process”, composed of many different tasks. Next comes the even more demanding “self-regulation level”, being able not only to execute and evaluate tasks, but also adjust and improve them. Finally, there is the “self level” – individual assessment. Being provided with such feedback students are not only well guided by the teacher in their present process of learning but they are also taught how to learn to obtain their goals.
6. Positive Feedback in formative (and summative) assessment

“Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative.” (Hattie & Temperley, 2007, p. 82).

The author of this article strongly believes that positive feedback should be a part positive communication between a teacher and their students. The main characteristic of this process of communication is a consensus-oriented approach, where problems are considered to be challenges which need to be taken up in a collective effort. To make this ongoing interactive communication successful, one can use various feedback mechanisms: written and oral, verbal and, very broadly understood, non-verbal, real and virtual, qualitative and quantitative, formal and informal, etc. No matter which type of feedback is used, it should be positive and, as such, motivate students to develop their skills and knowledge, guide them through the complexities of the educational process and reinforce positive results by using system of praise and rewards to stimulate and appreciate achievement. Having heard about their strengths, students should be encouraged to develop them and the teacher should be a facilitator in this process.

Creating a positive classroom atmosphere at the outset of each course and keeping it throughout is one of the main priorities for a teacher. The main tool to obtain it is a
continuous process of positive communication, with various forms of positive feedback as its pillars.

7. Ongoing Needs’ Analysis in formative (and summative) assessment

“Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the [results are] actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs.” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 2). A positive classroom is student-centered. Therefore, the educational process has to revolve around the student. To make the content appropriate for the student, it should start with a detailed needs’ and expectations’ analysis. Such an analysis should not, however, only take place at the beginning of the course but also at its later stages, at regular intervals, as a corrective adaptation process.

Based on this analysis a teacher is able to formulate and then present to their students clearly specified goals and outcomes of the whole learning process. By providing students with a set of tools which make their learning easier, faster and more efficient (templates, handouts, useful links, guidelines, etc.), a teacher creates favorable learning circumstances, satisfying the needs of their students in this area, too. It is important to do so both in formative and summative assessment, mainly because it creates better conditions for learning. However, in the case of summative assessment it concerns the process of learning taking place at present and refers to the needs associated with this process and the results obtained in it. As far as formative assessment is concerned, satisfying the needs appearing in this particular process should stimulate learning, not only now but also in the future. Therefore, its importance in the whole process of lifelong learning cannot be stressed enough.

8. Formative assessment in a positive classroom

Some of the building blocks of a positive classroom have already been referred to in the previous section. This section concentrates mainly on the role of a teacher as the master builder of a positive classroom. To begin with, the main characteristic of this “construction” is flexibility. Depending on the whole group of students participating in a course and their characteristics a teacher has to be ready and willing to change the building blocks, both “big” and “small”. The “big” elements are, for example, the framework of the course, the methods of working or the set of needs addressed by the syllabus prepared for each group. The “small” ones, in turn, refer to the needs, expectations, methods of learning, etc. of each individual student – expressed not only at the beginning of the course but also at its later stages. Assessment, preferably formative, is also among those modifiable elements, both of a group as a whole and each of its members.
While working with and assessing their students, a teacher should play the role of a stimulator and facilitator. In a student-centered approach the learning process is considered to be the ownership of each individual student, and a teacher should refrain from interfering with this private learning space. On the other hand, though, while playing the role of an (external) advisor and facilitator, a teacher ought to be ready to guide their students through the meanders of the educational process, if requested by them, and assess them according to clearly specified criteria.

9. Concluding remarks

As it can be concluded from the above text, positive feedback and ongoing needs’ analysis are the two pillars of formative assessment and are among the main characteristics of a positive classroom. In such a classroom a teacher is able to specify tasks, modify them according to students’ remarks, clarify some problems, add some necessary instructions, and then assign them, assess, add (constructive) feedback, reply to feedback, etc. Positive feedback should be presented to the learners in the process of continuous communication, encompassing all of them and allowing each of them to respond to it and, possibly, express their doubts and/or discuss problems. Apart from being interactive it should also be multidirectional: from a teacher to an individual student, the whole group, or subgroups, depending on the requirements of a specific situation and educational task to be completed. Providing positive feedback, a teacher also needs to refer to some problems and weaknesses which are inevitable at every stage of educational process. If, however, they are considered as areas of improvement, and a teacher provides guidelines on how to work on these areas, then students are encouraged to undertake an effort to advance and be successful.

Bibliography


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