ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Formative Assessment in the Foreign Language Classroom

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**ABSTRACT**

The objective of every good teacher is that students can have a successful and progressive performance throughout the course. However, there are times when what is taught in the classroom is not enough for the proper outcome of some students who may have some learning difficulties. "What should we do with these students?", "how can we find the source of their real difficulty?" and "how to deal with such problems?" are common questions among teachers and about which we intend to reflect in this work. In order to do so, we decided to compare our students with a patient looking for medical care, in order to show him the steps to overcome the difficulties he might face.

**KEYWORDS:** Assessment; Foreign language learning; Foreign language teaching.

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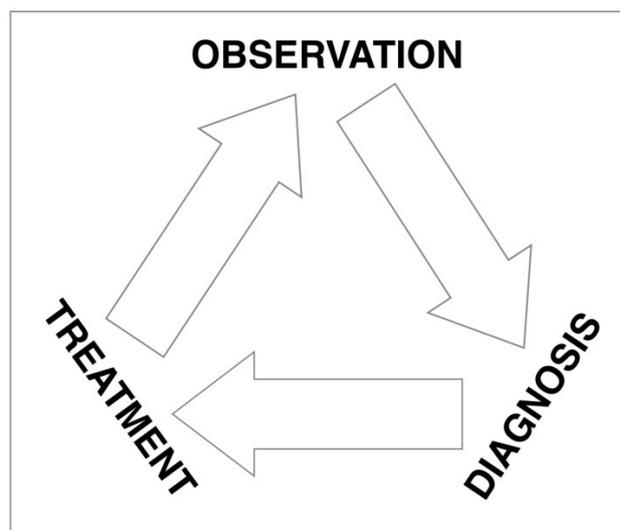<profmatheusba@gmail.com>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Through the process of teaching and learning of a foreign[1] language, it is expected that students reach different levels of understanding and use of the topics taught. It is also expected that this knowledge be sufficient to enable students, based on practices they have previously had in the classroom, to communicate in an authentic environment outside the controlled situations presented during classes.

One of the problems encountered during these practices is what a teacher must do with those students who, for several reasons, fail to achieve the expected results in the communicative environment and, therefore, require more attention from the teacher in the classroom, as well as parallel work outside the classroom to continue moving forward in their learning without losing motivation and still keeping up with their classmates.

The teaching profession, at least in this specific point, resembles the medical profession and also the ones of other professionals in the health sciences: the teacher is often asked, through a work of initial observation of the student, to give a diagnosis of what is not functioning properly, then, propose a treatment for them and predict the prognosis, and last, follow the evolution of such treatment, in order to change what has been prescribed or reassure the option chosen.

In order for the teacher to help the student overcome his difficulties, similar to what doctors do to their patients, it is necessary that the teacher follow three important steps: observation, diagnosis and treatment. It is important to emphasize that these steps are carried out in a cyclical and continuing way until the "patient" (the student) is "cured".



**Figure 1:** Diagram of the cyclical approach to assessing students' needs.

Before starting to discuss the first step of this cycle, it is necessary to consider some issues:

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[1] The term *foreign* in this text refers to any language learned by the person other than his first language.

## 1.1.  What is Formative assessment?

Fernandes (2011) presents an overview of the basis of the formative and summative assessment. According to him the two concepts emerged in the late 1960s but were initially used to assess programs, and not students and their learning outcomes. In the 1970s, the formative assessment is, for the first time, used to assess student's learning, but still, very focused on the results and only at the end of each curricular unit. It is important to mention this first use, because it brought to students' evaluation some innovative practices for the period.

In the late 1980s, a new Formative assessment emerges, focused on a process that occurs during the learning, more attentive to the processes underlying learning itself but without disregarding the results. Formative assessment is considered to be more interactive and continuous, and, contrary to other forms of evaluation, it needs the active participation of students in order to be done. This new kind of Formative assessment comes alongside with a clearer concept, assessment for learning, in contrast with assessment of learning, which correlates to summative assessment.

Simply put, Formative assessment, is, "the promotion of assessment to support learning (Gardner, 2006)". Its main objective is to gather information in order to support and guide students to help them improve during their learning. That way, feedback is key, and must be done considering its frequency and a more descriptive nature , rather than a purely quantitative one. Regarding this quantitative characteristic, Fernandes (2011) considers that  Formative assessment, similarly to Summative assessment, can be quantitative. He says that:

> Both [formative and summative assessment] must be rigorous and both may use quantitative and qualitative data. It is necessary to know what use will be done with the information gathered, whether it is quantitative or qualitative. For example, a test may be administered, graded and classified quantitatively but the results can be used with the sole purpose of being formative; that is, giving feedback to students to help them learn and regulate their learning.[2] (Fernandes, 2011, p. 89 – our translation)

So, it is clear from this perspective that both types of assessment, formative and summative, can and should be used to help students' learning.

## 1.2.  What is the motivation of my student?

Learning why the student is studying the foreign language is paramount, since it can be a key factor in addressing what is going to be treated later on. In addition, whichever extra work that the teacher comes to ask a student has to be in accordance with their motivation for him to be more interested

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[2] In Portuguese: Ambas devem ser rigorosas e ambas podem utilizar dados de natureza quantitativa ou qualitativa. O que é necessário é sabermos qual a utilização que vamos dar à informação obtida, seja ela quantitativa ou qualitativa. Por exemplo, um teste pode ser administrado, corrigido e classificado quantitativamente mas os seus resultados serem utilizados com fins exclusivamente formativos; isto é, distribuir feedback aos alunos que os ajude a aprender e a regular as suas aprendizagens.

in doing so. If the student feels that he has a gap that needs to be filled in his learning, and the proposed activity to fill this gap is related to the reason why he is studying the language in the first place, he will be more prone to perform what the teacher proposes as extra work.

## 1.3. What are my student's likes? What are his hobbies?

Knowing the interests of the student facilitates the prescribing of extra work to be done by him. If a student likes sports and has difficulty with reading comprehension, for instance, it will be much more interesting and motivating for him to read articles from sports newspapers and magazines than reading about international politics as extra work. That is, the more the teacher knows his pupil, the easier it will be for him to make the student interested in the activities, since, of course, the teacher uses this information when deciding what will be asked from this specific student. When talking about the importance of knowing one's student, Pellegrini (2003) says that:

> In order to have an assessment for learning it is essential to know every student and their necessities. Thus, the teacher will be able to think of ways for all students to reach their objectives. Janssen Felipe da Silva, researcher of the Federal University of Pernambuco, says that it is important to identify necessities, not learning problems.[3] (Pellegrini, 2003 – our translation)

It is clear, from Pellegrini's point of view that the necessities of the students are paramount in determining how the work will be carried out by the student. Also, that his interests are also important in helping when dealing with such necessities.

## 1.4. What do we expect of our students?

Knowing what is expected of our students at a given level and the language knowledge that students already have is one of the first things the teacher should consider to prepare extra work for the students, to avoid future frustration. Likewise, the student should be aware of what the teacher expects of its outcome and which level he is expected to come to when he receives an instruction from the teacher and carries out an activity. With goals established beforehand, the task will be more palpable, and the goal will be more likely achieved.

With all this information at hand, the teacher must then proceed to the first step of the cycle: the observation.

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[3] In Portuguese: Para que a avaliação sirva à aprendizagem é essencial conhecer cada aluno e suas necessidades. Assim o professor poderá pensar em caminhos para que todos alcancem os objetivos. O importante, diz Janssen Felipe da Silva, pesquisador da Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, não é identificar problemas de aprendizagem, mas necessidades.

## 2. THE CYCLICAL APPROACH TO ASSESSING STUDENTS' NEEDS

### 2.1. The observation

The observation of the student's performance must be done from the first day of class to the last one. When a new school year begins we often do not know who our students are. Thus, it is necessary to be opened to learn about the students regarding their interests and motivations as well as assess their prior knowledge of the language.

This initial assessment will serve as a parameter for the construction and development of extra work that comes to be necessary while you are responsible for the students' development. Regarding this initial aspect of the assessment, Zabala (1998) says that:

> The knowledge of what each student knows, knows how to do, and how it is, must be the starting point that should allow us, in relation to the objectives and intended learning content, to establish the kind of activity and task that has to favor the learning outcome of every boy and girl. Thus, it provides us references to define a hypothetical intervention proposal, the planning of a set of learning activities which, given our experience and personal knowledge, we suppose will allow our students progression.[4] (Zabala, 1998, p. 199 – our translation)

There is no specific time for the observation of a student's work. It is important that the teacher be attentive to all situations involving the use of the proposed language, such as interactions in the classroom and written production, for instance, as the simplest things that are said or written by students, may show opportunities for growth and improvement of the student's knowledge.

Another equally important issue is what to do with the data obtained from this observation. Teachers must not rely on their memory to store all information regarding students. Thus, a place for recording the information gathered during the observation to facilitate future reference is recommended in order to facilitate the assessment and the evaluation of the student, as well as to compare one's performance with oneself, to see how and how much the student has improved since the first observation.

These early impressions are shared by Anderson Moço (2009) when he poses that "Being attentive to students reactions while they produce is fundamental. Taking notes of what they say, especially when they do it spontaneously, may help teachers realize what their ideas are about what they are learning[5]" (our translation).

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[4] In Portuguese: O conhecimento do que cada aluno sabe, sabe fazer e como é, é o ponto de partida que deve nos permitir, em relação aos objetivos e conteúdos de aprendizagem previstos, estabelecer o tipo de atividade e tarefas que têm que favorecer a aprendizagem de cada menino e menina. Assim, pois, nos proporciona referências para definir uma proposta hipotética de intervenção, a organização de uma série de atividades de aprendizagem que, dada nossa experiência e nosso conhecimento pessoais, supomos que possibilitará o progresso dos alunos.

[5] In Portuguese: Ficar atento às reações dos alunos enquanto produzem é fundamental. Anotar o que eles falam, sobretudo de forma espontânea, pode ajudar a perceber quais as ideias deles sobre o que estão aprendendo.

## 2.2. The diagnosis

A good diagnosis can only be given through thorough analysis, devoid of any sort of prejudice by the teacher, on data collected during the observation phase. These data shall never be analyzed in isolation, but together, seeking to find what problems or difficulties are frequent to that specific student and what is the basic underlying cause of them. Also, the data gathered must never be used to put a tag on the student regarding his production so far, or even to make an account of every mistake he has made. Again, the purpose of the data gathering and analysis is to direct which way the teacher and the student should follow. This aspect is stated by Moço (2010): "A good diagnosis does not have as its objective to account errors or classify (and label) students. This is, it is not a test, in the traditional sense. The idea is to observe similar problems which will allow us to plan and direct the activities[6]" (our translation).

From the data obtained and recorded during the observation, the teacher should ask the student to solve situations by using the language he should have already learned in a systematic way, but that for some reason was not internalized by the student. From this more careful "examination", the teacher can reach a more accurate conclusion regarding this student, by considering the production in this context together with the records previously made.

## 2.3. The treatment

When detecting what linguistic problems the student is facing, the teacher should first consider how much knowledge about the topic to be worked on the student already has respecting their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), suggested by Vygotsky (1982), so that the work to be done is neither too easy, nor impossible to be performed, but challenging and motivating at the same time.

The ZPD consists on the distance between the level of development of the learner in which he can complete tasks unaided and an upper lever of his potential development, in which he can complete tasks with the help of a peer, more qualified in this particular aspect, or a teacher. This zone is based on a sociocultural perspective, where social interaction is a key concept for the development of learning. Knowing whether the subject taught is in the student's ZPD or not will help him look for an adequate treatment, and help the teacher propose tasks that are not too easy, nor impossible to be performed, but challenging and motivating at the same time, including slightly more difficult tasks, but appropriate for the student to complete with the help of more capable peers.

It is also important that the teacher, when thinking about the work to be developed by the student with the difficulty, be quite precise in addressing it, looking for the most urgent aspect to be "treated". That is, even if the student has several difficulties, the teacher should elect the most urgent one,

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[6] In Portuguese: O bom diagnóstico não tem por objetivo contabilizar os erros ou classificar (e rotular) os alunos. Ou seja, não é uma prova, no sentido tradicional. A idéia é enxergar problemas semelhantes que permitam direcionar o planejamento das atividades.

because the treatment will be performed during the school term and the student also needs to meet the demands required in the course they are enrolled.

If the teacher does not focus on a specific goal to work and, instead, tries to address all the difficulties at the same time, the student may feel burdened and unmotivated to work on a lot of difficulties, or may focus on such extra work and not meet the obligations necessary to advance in the course he is enrolled in that particular school year.

In short, the treatment cannot be any kind of activity; it must be an action directed to a goal, thus being an intentional action (Saviani *apud* Villas Boas, 2004).

## 2.4. Follow-up

Following the steps listed above, we cannot think that the teacher's duty is over. More than just "prescribing a medicine" for the student, the teacher has the obligation of following the development of the proposed solution.

Without proper attention of those involved in this work, be the student, as the subject who takes active part in the execution of the work, or the teacher, as a counseling agent, the production will be poor and possibly not as effective as it could be (Villas Boas *in* Alves, 2003, p. 63).

In addition, it is also imperative that a moment be reserved for the teacher to give feedback to the student in what concerns the work done. It is extremely important that students feel that their work is being given proper attention and that they receive in good time, the result of its production, as Senge (2005) says:

> The importance of timing is especially meaningful in this era of immediate gratitude. If students receive a feedback on their work many weeks after the evaluation was administered, they will probably be involved with other projects and will no longer focused on the work previously done. If the evaluation is a standardized test or a test based on the outcome in the class, the closer the students are to the learning demonstration, the more meaningful the feedback will be. (Senge, 2005, p. 115 – our translation)[7]

It is equally important to verify the student's perception about what is being worked on. This self-assessment of the student proves effective to promote in himself a need for change, without which the work will not be effective. That is, it is necessary, before engaging the student in the work to be done, to make him aware of the necessity for such work in accordance with the student's motivation to study the language referred. Senge (2005) states that:

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[7] In Portuguese: A importância do momento oportuno é especialmente significativa nesta era da gratificação imediata. Se os estudantes recebem um retorno sobre seu trabalho muitas semanas após o teste ser feito, provavelmente já estarão envolvidos com outro trabalho e não estarão mais concentrados no trabalho que foi feito. Se a avaliação for um teste padronizado ou um teste baseado no desempenho em sala de aula, quanto mais próximos os estudantes estiverem da demonstração de aprendizagem, mais significativo será o *feedback*.

The assessment challenges the students to make changes based on the data they present. Sometimes it is difficult to face this data. After all, if people do not take them seriously, they will not need to be changed. However, an honest assessment will tend to create a feeling of cognitive dissonance or unbalance - which forces people to deal with the necessity to change. (Senge, 2005, p. 115 – our translation)[8]

With all these considerations, both the teacher and the student can make an assessment of the improvement acquired from the work in progress, and thus propose changes in the implementation thereof, so that the ultimate goal is reached.

Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that this process is not linear but cyclical. The follow-up serves as an integral part of the new observation, as well as to define a new diagnosis and help in prescribing a new treatment, or changing the current one. Without this cyclical view, the work will remain stagnant and both the teacher and the student may mistakenly assume that, once executed, there will always be an effective improvement of what had been worked, which does not occur in all cases.

## 3. CONCLUSION

### 3.1. What not to do

When we talk about assessment of student performance and progress, there are simple, but important factors that teachers often do not pay attention and end up undermining the work done during an entire school year. Therefore, we believe it is extremely necessary to raise awareness to teachers about some of the wrong attitudes that we should not have.

The first one is: do not let your students go adrift! Giving a precise and in time feedback is essential for this student to be aware of their difficulties and can take actions to improve his performance. That is, the feedback of the teacher must have the necessary information so that students know how his performance is and what he can do to improve it. If this feedback is given late, it will probably be much more difficult to address and overcome such difficulties.

In addition, the teacher needs to show that he is interested in how this work is being carried out. If the student does not perceive this, he will probably not give it due importance. Remembering the student when the work is due and observing the steps he is taking to get an improvement out of the activities he has to perform are ways to show that the teacher is interested and, thus, determine whether the student needs new "medicines".

Another way of "letting go of the student" is becoming concerned with their performance only when the end of the term approaches, that is, when there is no more time for a more detailed and effective work.

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[8] In Portuguese: As avaliações desafiam os aprendizes a fazerem mudanças com base nos dados que apresentam. Às vezes é difícil enfrentar esses dados. Afinal, se as pessoas não os levarem a sério, não precisarão ser mudados. Contudo, uma avaliação honesta tenderá a criar uma sensação de dissonância cognitiva ou desequilíbrio – que faz com que as pessoas lidem com a necessidade de mudar.

The second attitude that can cause inefficiency in the whole process is a poor or inadequate choice of the work the student has to do with this student's interests. If the student fails to see one possible positive outcome for his life in the tasks proposed by the teacher, this student will not carry out this work properly. Hence the importance of adapting the work to be done to what the student expects to have at the end of the course, what he aims to do with the language he is learning and whether this extra work really helps him achieve his linguistic goals.

Last, but not least, wrong attitude of many teachers is to put all their attention on the problems of those students with difficulties and forget the students who do not necessarily require extra work to develop previously taught topics, because these students also need to feel challenged, they also need to feel they are developing, because if they get a feeling that they are not developing as much as they could, then what are they are doing in school anyways? These students also need attention and to be motivated with new challenges. This is the reason why the teacher must be careful and look for ways to further improve the language skills of those students.

These attitudes, as simple as they seem for experienced teachers, might not be so clear for those who are starting a career. In addition, there is the load of work teachers commonly have. It can be overwhelming and unencouraging for new teachers in the language classroom, which makes it extremely important to have the guidance of a more experienced teacher in the first years, who is able to not only help with tips and counseling, but also comforting in times of difficulty.

The teacher should be, then, ever-attentive to the students' needs, patient in times of difficulty, motivating and a partner, helping them when needed and daring them to move on when they are ready to do so.

## 3.2.  Final Thoughts

The problems encountered by some students during the school term, which prevent them to keep up with the pace of their fellow classmates is a challenge to teaching practice and, often, teachers do not know how to deal with many of them.

By comparing the assessment teachers need to carry out while teaching with what occurs in a health or medical environment, we intend to provide a simpler approach to help especially, but not only, teachers who are beginning in this career and feel the burden of so many new responsibilities and preoccupations that come when we are relatively new to the job.

Throughout this work we found that through the understanding that the assessment is not a closed, but cyclical, and that each turn in this cyclical process leads the student to a new stage in their learning, these difficulties can be better examined by the teacher and consequently better treated and overcome. By paying attention to each step in this cyclical approach, teachers can understand what is expected from them when assessing their students, and, most importantly, they can understand more clearly what they need to do during each step and why it is paramount that they follow such steps.

Observing the student, identifying their difficulties and testing (through the comparison of the data gathered through observation) if they really exist,

leads the teacher to a precise diagnosis and the possibility of more effective treatment. Such treatment should be carried out in enough time and always taking account and respecting the students' ZPD. With good assessment, in which the student also can evaluate themselves, the probability of overcoming these difficulties will be much higher.

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