

## ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: WHY FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT MATTERS



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**Abstract:** The present research focuses on clarifying the concept of formative assessment as well as revealing its role in improving learning. Research evidence is provided to prove that assessment should not be viewed as a period of evaluating students' learning outcomes. It is rather an efficient tool, providing both the teacher and the learner feedback on the learning process and progress. This approach shaped the content of the Competence Based Tests, designed to complete the set of new textbooks in English for the primary school in Moldova.

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### Introduction

Assessment is a significant component of the teaching-learning-evaluation process. Traditionally, however, educators spend more time and effort on planning the teaching process and less time on thinking about assessment. In language education, one major issue with assessment could be the fact that teachers focus more on understanding

the constantly changing trends in teaching and assume that assessment policies remain the same. In addition, until recently evaluation of students' achievement dominated the assessment process in EFL classes, which means placing the focus on mastery of isolated language items and on linguistic accuracy. In many classrooms and for most students evaluation time (tests) was the source of students' anxiety and fear, which according to Smith (1996) "affects their language learning as well as their self-image." Communicative teaching methodology brings with it a considerable emphasis on formative evaluation "with more use of descriptive records of learner development in language and learning which [track] language development along with other curricular abilities" (Rea-Dickins and Rixon:151). Recent studies point out more distinctly the role of assessment for learning and motivation. Formative assessment prioritizes the students and their needs, and focuses on changing teaching/learning strategies to benefit students' learning.

### **Understanding Formative Assessment**

The etymology of the word 'assessment' may help us understand the true meaning of it. 'Assessment' from the Latin root *assidere* means to sit beside another, which reveals the friendly feature of the assessment process. The notion of formative assessment, however, is relatively new.

In 1967, Michael Scriven wrote about two roles that evaluation might play: (1) "It may have a role in the on-going improvement of the curriculum" (Scriven: 41), and (2), "the evaluation process may serve to enable administrators to decide whether the entire finished curriculum refined by use of the evaluation process in its first role, represents a sufficiently significant advance on the available alternatives to justify the expense of adoption by a school system" (Scriven: 41-42). He suggested using the terms 'formative' and 'summative' evaluation "to qualify evaluation in these roles" (Scriven: 43). Therefore, Scriven proposed to use formative assessment to assess effectiveness of a curriculum and orient schools on how to improve them.

In 1969, Benjamin Bloom acknowledged the traditional role that tests played in judging and classifying students, but noted that there was another role for evaluation and pointed out that 'formative evaluation' is used to provide feedback and correctives at each stage in the teaching-learning process. He claims: "*Formative evaluation should be regarded as part of the learning process and should in no way be confused with the judgment of the capabilities of the students or used as a part of the grading process*" (Bloom: 48).

Bloom continued his theoretical work, examining several issues relating to formative assessment. He identified two essential elements of formative learning: feedback for students and corrective conditions for all important components of learning. He also argued that formative information could be used to divide the class into cooperative groups based on the corrections required. From this point, teachers could differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students through selected teaching strategies and corrective responses (Bloom, 1976). It is therefore explicit that both Scriven and Bloom emphasize the leading role of formative evaluation in making changes. From a teacher's perspective, formative assessment of a student should lead to shaping /changing the student's learning.

Based on scholars' opinions on formative assessment, the following definition can be derived: a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become self-directed learners. According to Thomas R. Guskey, for assessments to become an integral part of the instructional process, teachers need to change their approach in three important ways. They must "1) use assessments as sources of information for both students and teachers, 2) follow assessments with high-quality corrective instruction, and 3) give students second chances to demonstrate success" (Guskey: 11).

Traditionally, the teacher has been regarded as responsible for monitoring student's progress in learning. Formative assessment shifts the focus and highlights that it is also necessary to take account of the role of the learners themselves, and of their peers, in understanding and assessing their learning. Black and Wiliam (2006) emphasize that the teacher is responsible for designing and implementing an effective learning environment, and the learner is responsible for the learning within that environment.

Thus, the responsibility for learning rests with both the teacher and the learner. Therefore, it is mandatory they both do all they can to diminish the impact of any failures. Figure 1 (from Wiliam & Thompson, 2007), indicates that formative assessment can be conceptualized as consisting of five key strategies

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. Creating effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward;

4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another;
5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning.

	Where the learner is going	Where the learner is right now	How to get there
Teacher	1 Clarifying learning intentions and criteria for success	2 Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding	3 Providing feedback that moves learners forward
Peer	Understanding and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success	4 Activating students as instructional resources for one another	
Learner	Understanding learning intentions and criteria for success	5 Activating students as the owners of their own learning	

Figure 1: Aspects of formative assessment

Formative assessment, according to Dylan Wiliam (2006), is a process that “involves the gathering and analysis of assessment-elicited evidence for the purpose of determining when and how to adjust instructional activities or learning tactics in order to achieve learning goals” (Wiliam: 285). It is undertaken throughout the course and helps with reflecting on the results and what needs to be improved. Formative assessments may comprise quizzes, exit cards, journal prompts, and classroom discussions. Wiliam recommends that formative assessment should rarely be graded because grades might “imply a judgment of student competence that may not be appropriate until the end of the learning cycle or until key points in a learning sequence are reached” (Wiliam: 286).

According to Black and Wiliam (2009), formative assessment is assessment *for* learning. While benefitting teachers, formative assessment also provides advantages to students. They become more closely adjusted to learning goals and their progress toward achieving them. Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam identified four main types of formative assessment: (a) questioning, (b) feedback, (c) peer assessment, and (d) self-assessment.

Black and the other researchers concluded, “The overall message is that formative tests should become a positive part of the learning process. Through active involvement in the testing process students can see that they can be the beneficiaries rather than the victims of testing, because tests can help them improve their learning” (Black: 16).

### **Competence Based Tests as tools for formative assessment**

*Competence Based Tests*, levels A1.1, A1.2 and A1 are an effective teaching support in assessing and self-assessing students' school

progress in learning English. They were developed in accordance with the National Curriculum for Foreign Language 1 for primary classes (2018), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2018), the Methodology for Assessing the Criterion by Descriptors (2019) and the English textbooks English A1.1, A1.2 and A1 (2019 edition). Given that formative assessment values and supports learning through immediate and interactive regulation by the teacher, the set contains items that help to reinforce what pupils learnt in class.

The number of tests in the collection corresponds to the number of lessons in each unit of the textbook and the decision was determined by research evidence on the focus and length of formative assessment.

In the initial conception of mastery learning proposed by Bloom (Bloom et al., 1971), an instructional unit is divided into several successive phases. First of all, teaching/learning activities are undertaken in relation with the objectives of the unit. Once these activities have been completed, a formative assessment, usually a paper-pencil test, is proposed to the students. The results of the test provide feedback to the teacher and students and are used to define appropriate corrective measures for students who have not yet mastered the instructional objectives. Correctives can take various forms: additional exercises, different types of instructional material, such as verbal vs. visual representations, small-group discussions, one-to-one tutoring, computer-based tasks. In all these cases, however, the aim remains the remediation of learning difficulties identified by formative assessment. William and Thompson proposed the typology of formative assessment including long-cycle, medium-cycle and short-cycle. According to the scholars, only short- and medium-cycle formative assessments improve student achievement. Moreover, in classrooms where medium- and short-cycle formative assessment was used, teachers reported greater professional satisfaction and increased student engagement in learning.

<b>Type</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Length</b>
Long-cycle	between instructional units	four weeks to one year or more
Medium-cycle	between lessons	one day to two weeks
Short-cycle	within a single lesson	five seconds to one hour

Figure 2: Typology of Kinds of Formative Assessment

Considering this data, the items from the formative assessment tests are to be perceived by the teachers as models of flexible action; the

teachers are free to decide at what stage of the unit (medium-cycle type) or of the lesson (short-cycle type) they will intervene.

### **Assessment and Young Learners**

*Competence Based Tests*, levels A1.1, A1.2 and A1 address young learners; therefore they were developed to fit the cognitive and psychological characteristics of this age group.

Designing formative assessment procedures for young learners can be challenging and require knowledge of their specific features that need to be taken into account. McKay (2008) identifies three main characteristics of young learners: “growth, literacy and vulnerability” (McKay: 5). Relating to growth, young learners do not understand appropriately the notion of time and future; their metalanguage is not developed yet and their concentration span is shorter comparing to adults. Moreover, they learn through concrete experiences that involve the visual and tactile sense. It is important to mention that, in Moldovan schools young learners learn to read and to write in both their native and foreign languages almost simultaneously. Therefore, teachers should take into account their effort and choose wisely what is appropriate for them. With regard to their vulnerability, they seem to be more sensible to feedback or reactions that come from both teachers and classmates.

“Young learners are notoriously poor test taker.... [T]he younger the child being evaluated, assessed, or tested, the more errors are made...[and] the greater the risk of assigning false labels to them” (Katz: 1). Therefore, children need to learn and be evaluated in an anxiety-reduced, if not anxiety-free, environment. This can be achieved if children perceive assessment as an integral component of the learning/teaching process rather than an independent process whose purpose is to pass judgment on their abilities in relation to their classmates.

Thus, using formative assessment can help decrease the level of anxiety generated by concentration on linguistic accuracy and increase students' comfort zone and feeling of success by stressing communicative fluency. In order to allow pupils to demonstrate what they know and can do, assessment in the foreign language should be a natural outcome of what they do in the classroom setting. In this respect, the Tests contain familiar activities which ‘mirror’ the things they do regularly in class, which will make it easier for pupils to demonstrate their abilities.

In response to the growing interest in the teaching of English as a foreign language to young learners, Yael Bejarano has conducted studies to

design and EFL programme for them. The designed model takes into account the cognitive and affective need of the young learners as well as acknowledges the role of formative assessment specifically with this age group of learners. When assessing young learners, the following considerations should be kept in mind (Bejarano: 86-87):

1. Assessments should be an integral part of the teaching / learning process – each lesson is an opportunity for assessment.
2. Methods of assessment should recognize that young children need familiar contexts and familiar activities which ‘mirror’ the things they do regularly in class, in order to be able to demonstrate their abilities.
3. Information on all dimensions of learning should be monitored: affective and social as well as linguistic and cognitive.
4. The emphasis of assessment should be on “Can Do” – finding out what the pupils can do and what they still need help with.
5. Assessments should be appropriate to age level in terms of content and cognitive demands.
6. The teacher should find time to sit with each pupil individually to reflect on learning and allow the pupil to express his/her feelings about his/her learning.

*Competence Based Tests* respond to most of the listed considerations. They focus on formative assessment activities, providing information that will aid the learner as well as inform instruction. Each level contains as many tests as lessons in the textbook (1), they include tasks that are familiar to the pupils, for example *Listen and Tick; Read and draw lines* (2). Each test contains items that assess the formation of both linguistic competences (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) and sociolinguistic, pragmatic and inter / pluricultural competences (3). Each assessment item is accompanied by three emoticons, which serve as symbols for students' self-esteem in solving that item. Self-assessment charts include “Can-do” descriptors, encouraging learners to reflect on their learning(4). Both language and visual support correspond to the learners’ age (5). Because the set contains activities designed for every lesson, the teacher may use them to ensure an on-going process of collecting information on the pupils’ abilities, difficulties and progress.

Examples of formative assessment in English A1.1:

### Lesson 3

#### LISTENING 1.1

Listen and circle the letters.

C F S H B O P R



#### SPEAKING 1.6 1.8 2.4

Introduce your friend.

Hello, this is ...  
He / She is my ...

Hello.

Hello.

Activate W



Linguistic competence (1.1): recognizing sounds or groups of sounds specific to the English language, pronounced in isolation and in words, while listening;

Linguistic competence (1.6): Using certain intonation patterns and other phenomena specific to the English language in simple and familiar communication contexts;

Linguistic competence (1.8): Using words and simple short sentences in simple and familiar communication contexts, following models;

#### WRITING 1.16



Look and complete the sentences.

The ball is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The cat is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Socio-linguistic competence (2.4): Reproducing simple sentences, the formulas of addressing, greeting people and other basic formulas of

politeness to establish social contact in simple communication situations.

### Conclusion

Formative assessment is currently viewed as a teaching tool rather than assessment tool. In the young learner classroom, the teacher should focus on formative assessment activities - to provide information which will benefit the pupils' learning as well as inform instruction. To this end, assessment should be viewed as an ongoing process of collecting information on the pupils' abilities, difficulties and progress. The most effective means of collecting this information is by observing pupils in the classroom setting, recording their performance as they are engaged in activities and reviewing samples of their work over time. In addition to on-going informal assessments, periodic summative assessment



procedures can be used to measure achievements and indicate what goals have been achieved after an extended period of instruction. *Competence Based Tests* will assist teachers in carrying formative assessment while teaching English in the primary schools of Moldova. The designed collection will enable teachers to get constructive feedback, which, on the one hand, will help to increase the efficiency of English language teaching and, on the other hand, will inform students and parents about the level of performance achieved.

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