PROVIDING ASSESSMENT
IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: EFFECTS ON THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Assessment is a widespread feature of social life. It implies a relational and dialogical process, inherent to any human interaction. In all organizational context, assessment is an analytical process that consists of the information transmitted to an entity individual or group, human or machine. about its previous behavior, so that the entity can adjust its current and future behavior in order to obtain a wanted result. In this paper we will approach the process of offering feedback i.e. a praise or a criticism. in order to trigger a reaction that is expected to produce a change, a behavioral improvement. This process is considered from the perspective of the tertiary education system, with practical examples from the entrepreneurial field and from the workplace. Possible types of feedback as well as their characteristics.

Keywords: assessment, feedback, interaction, education, workforce.

1. Interaction in assessing

In this paper the process of assessment is considered in terms of reaction, namely as an integral part of any learning session that accelerates the progress of understanding, professional and personal development. Correspondingly, the importance of constructive, efficient, empathetic and specific assessment focused on a certain type of behavior and considering the specific type of learner's study preference is emphasized (Sambell, 2011, Evans, 2013). From the beginning a clear distinction is made between evaluation and feedback. Feedback is seen as an instrumental part of an efficient communication process which aims to self-regulate and rebalance a system by modifying a type of behavior on a long run. Therefore, in this article assessment is seen merely as the evaluation of a person's achievement on a job or of a student's getting through a course in a close relationship with the reaction the trainer should have in order to improve that person's / student's performance and skills.

Another aspect to be mentioned is that inadequate assessment or even its complete absence (i.e. lack of reaction.) will generate an erroneous perception of the performances of undertaken activities. For instance, in the educational field, if students do not receive continuous feedback there is a risk that they will self-generate their own system of measuring, based on wrong indexes. On the one hand, Bhattarei (2007) states that avoiding feedback is not fair either to the students who give all their

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interest, nor to those who have low performance and, above all, it is not fair to the integrity of the learning objectives. On the other hand, developing the ability to provide and receive feedback among students will have the direct effect of increasing their level of independence, autonomy and initiative on a long term. According to current research, these skills have a direct impact on the prospects of future graduates' employability, soft skills being considered professional qualities appreciated and sought by employers (Kubota: 2011). Therefore, developing and improving skills in any field is related to offering and accepting efficient assessment (here, i.e. feedback), by guiding students to be self-aware of their level of performance at a specific moment.

1.1 Types of assessment

In terms of timing, assessment can be performed *before*, *during* or *after* learning. The first type diagnoses prior knowledge and sets the learning objectives. The second type is called formative, and the third category refers to the summative assessment.

In terms of purpose, literature distinguishes between *summative* and *formative* types of assessment. The purpose of summative assessment is to measure the level of gained knowledge and proficiency after an instructional unit. Accordingly, measuring can be made through final exams, surveys, projects, term papers, portfolios, etc. During a formative assessment, the purpose is to gather *feedback* in order to improve both learner's and trainer's performances of the learning process. It can be based on the different learning styles and it can include quizzes, homework, essay, observation activities, interviews, etc.
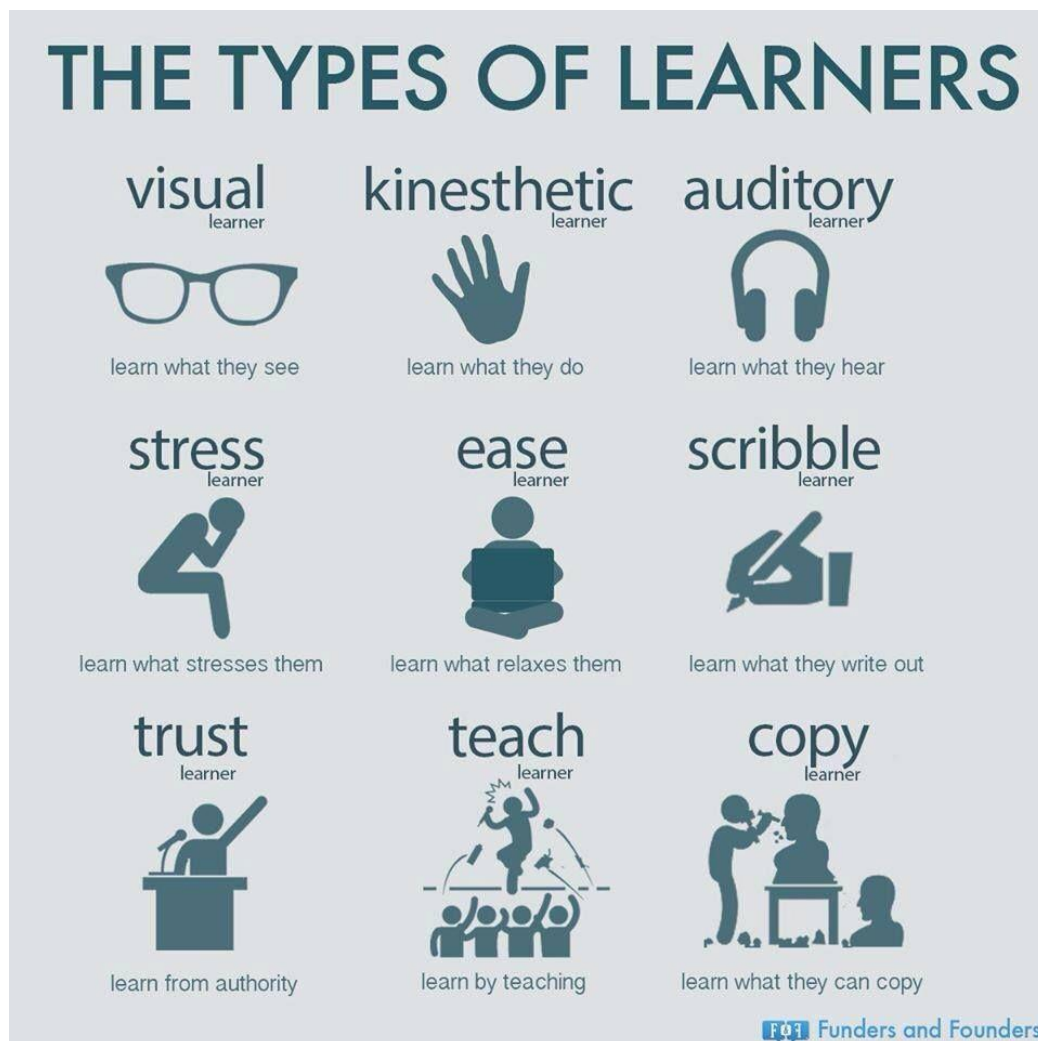

Image 1: *The types of learners*, https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/329959110190316898/?lp=true

In a learner-centered education system, based on specific types of learners (see *Image 1*) assessments are lined up with the critical knowledge and skills that guide each learner towards mastery of agreed upon know-hows and proficiencies. The primary types of assessment are three folded: *assessment of learning*, *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning*. The first one is based on performance and is called summative. It usually shows what learners and education systems achieve in a period of time. The second type diagnoses. It is formative and provides immediate, real-time feedback, while learning is actually taking place. The third type refers to a self-examination, by the learner him/herself. It helps the learner understand what to do in order to become better, to reach self-improvement, in a metacognition process.

Strictly referring to the second type of assessment, a number of taxonomies and typologies have been developed to classify and explain the different aspects of the feedback practice. They refer, on the one hand, to important aspects of evaluation practice in the education system (Moirand, 1990; Lussier, 1992; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996), but have also been transferred economically, with an emphasis on improving communication at the workplace (Westerman, Heuett, Reno, Curry, 2014). Most classifications propose a dichotomous approach to the notion of feedback. Thus, it differentiates between *the positive type feedback* and *the negative type of feedback*. Positive feedback is motivating because it confirms taken actions in order to confirm and reinforce certain behaviors that are desired to be repeated. Negative feedback brings a critique to a type of behavior in order to change and / or improve it.

1.2 Providing feedback

Behavior is easy to change, as opposed to personality; it is believed that we can change what we do and not what we are (Bhattarai, 2007: 152). In other words, if interventions criticize the person and not the actual task, they will have a negative effect on the person's performance. But if the focus is strictly on the task, providing feedback is to be be successful.

Garber (2004: 32) states that at the workplace usually people receive insufficient or even no feedback at all. Even more, when they receive it, it is too late to be able to rectify anything. This is because the interaction in feedback providing is often felt as uncomfortable. Nonetheless, most of the times, the feedback that is the most difficult to express and listen to offers the greatest possibility of development. Garber (2004: 19-24) emphasizes the importance of differentiating between understanding what it is said / intended to be said and what is in fact understood / heard. In other words, there might be an important discrepancy between what was intended to be said and what was, in fact, understood and perceived.

The barriers of understanding during an effective communication make the difference between what is understood as compared to what one is able to perceive. This is why it is advisable for the feedback provider to state his point of view and then ask the beneficiary for his opinion. A functional model of dialogue could be:

"You have heard my opinion about the activity you have performed. Tell me, please, what have you understood?"

The answer is listened to, and in the reply one can say:

"I understand how you perceived my actions, but what I wanted to say was that .... What is your opinion now?".

This is an example of efficient and constructive feedback, in a working environment. It could have a lasting impact on the receiver, as it underlines the need to modify and / or improve a type of behavior. When offering evaluative feedback - also called prescriptive or corrective -, the one who offers it represents an authority, such as a commission in a competition, a teacher, a person with a higher position at the job, and sometimes even a parent or an acquaintance. Therefore, this authority will be

able to offer and propose rewards or punishments or will express an opinion through praise or admonitions. In this case, the power relationship established between the participants implicitly suggests that the feedback recipient should not have too great a right to reply. This type of feedback is normative, focusing on the conative and affective aspects of learning and practice in the educational environment or at the workplace. It is focused on the orientation towards performance, by issuing value judgments, formal or informal, explicit or implicit. (El Tatawy, 2002).

1.3. Assessment in Teaching Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes

For instance, in the field of training for proficiency in a foreign language for specific purposes, Lightbown and Spada (2013) define corrective feedback as any indication to learners that the way they use a target foreign language is incorrect. This indication may include any type of the teacher's reactions towards the learner. A formal indication may be a grade in the register book. In the case of an entrepreneurial environment, at the workplace, the formal indication could be the annual report on the degree of accomplishment of the tasks accomplished by an employee. An informal indication may be verbal (e.g. explanation by direct, implicit evaluation, by the teacher's immediate reaction towards a mistake in a specific context; or by providing metalinguistic information, such as "do not forget to ..."), or non-verbal (e.g. teacher's face expression, gestures).

When providing descriptive feedback (also called productive or constructive), the aim is to produce a change in the degree of performance, to make a positive difference in the learner's proficiencies. The learning process or the activities at the workplace are evaluated through the responsibility of the person who undertakes them in a close collaboration with the latter. This type of feedback focuses on achieving and / or improving a previously established objective, namely, an instrumental learning objective when teaching foreign languages for specific purposes.

2. How to efficiently assess for learning in a business environment

Considered a heuristic procedure, the practice of descriptive feedback is an essential component of formative evaluation (Bhattarai, 2007; Sambell 2011) and constructive criticism, both in the educational and in the entrepreneurial environment, at the workplace. By shifting the focus from the critical, corrective component, to concrete training strategies that will lead to visible improvements in the results, those who are given descriptive feedback, i.e. authentic, are responsible for identifying their own weaknesses, namely, the differences between what they want from them and what they can offer concretely, through a process of self-awareness and self-evaluation. This type of feedback can be seen as formal or informal evaluation.

Garber (2004) and Bhattarai (2007) present strategies for offering feedback in order to transform any type of conversation into constructive discursive events. These strategies refer to the provided information (in terms of quantity, timing of the message), to its main objective, to the transmitter and beneficiary and to the communication method and channel. From the point of view of the provided information, it is important that effective feedback, be it negative or positive, refers specifically to a type of behavior. Too much information can be confusing, so it is preferable to be exact and strictly limited to what can be of benefit to the beneficiary. It is also important that feedback is provided at a time as near as possible to the event's occurrence. If the atmosphere is tense, the discussion can be postponed until after the event, when it can be approached with a more positive attitude.

It should not be overlooked that feedback is provided for the benefit of a beneficiary, to motivate and assist in the improvement of a skill or type of behavior and in under no circumstances for the transmitter to prove his / her own knowledge. Therefore, the main objective is to "change one's behavior, not one's personality" (Bhattarai, 2007: 152), by eliminating certain types of actions that hinder performance. If the beneficiary perceives that he / she is personally attacked, he / she will become defensive, and the possibility of a productive discussion can be lost. In addition, if the focus

is only on the specific description of a behavior and if the negative implications that action can have on the group, or on the long-term, are identified and explained, reaffirming, at the same time, confidence on the person receiving feedback, an action plan can be jointly established in order to achieve the expected results.

A safe communication environment is desirable and a meeting in a rather small space can create a state of comfort while providing feedback. If this activity takes place within a group, and if feedback is given by the members of a colleague, it must be planned in advance, in order not to create unfortunate interpretations based on simple gestures or non-verbal messages. Moreover, the understanding of the conveyed message must be checked, both at an individual level and at a group level, as well as the performance following the feedback. These procedures will stimulate self-reflection and self-evaluation of the one who has been evaluated. The practice of feedback involves a dialogical exchange of information that gives the beneficiary the freedom to choose how he / she will act in the future.

2.1. Effects on the business environment: contextual assessing for learning

To summarize, any effective and positive feedback, offered either in a business or in an educational environment, has 3 key elements:

1. *A type of behavior*: what and how the employee or the student did;

2. *A result*: what resulted from the employee's / student's behavior and how this affected the team and the company or what impact it might have on the further development of the student;

3. *Next steps*: how to get / maintain positive results, how to improve average results and / and how to improve / solve negative aspects.

Nonetheless, through a constructive dialogue, solutions can be sought in order not affect the business, in the case of the business environment, or the final grade, in the case of a student, while at the same time pursuing a solution so that this behavior does not repeat. This situation can be approached by means of a type of dialogue that can generate self-evaluation of one's own behavior.

3. Conclusions

In this paper I have defined the term of assessment and focused on its purpose for learning (i.e. feedback) and I have outlined the positive aspects of this process. I have offered a classification of the concept followed by the enumeration of the stages of this process and the need of providing effective feedback, both in a learning and a business environment.

In conclusion, effective feedback is an essential component of any type of learning or professional communication. In the process of providing feedback, trying to understand the dynamics of others' thinking, without criticizing, but only in order to strengthen, modify or improve a type of behavior leads to the development of self-assessment skills. A holistic and dialogical approach, which includes both expressing one's own point of view, and considering different perspectives, suggesting and looking for solutions, stimulates self-reflection, offering imminent perspectives to our own actions.

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