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PROVIDING CREATIVE ASSESSMENT METHODS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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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 contexts, assessment is an analytical process that consists of information transmitted to an entity individual or group, human or machine, on a previous behavior, so that the entity can adjust its current and future behavior in order to obtain a desired result.

In this paper, we approach the processes of assessment and offering feedback, i.e., praise or criticism, in order to trigger a reaction that is expected to produce a change seen as a behavioral improvement. This process is considered from the perspective of the tertiary education system, with practical examples from the educational environment. Possible types of creative assessment methods and feedback as well as their characteristics are discussed and exemplified.

Keywords: assessment; feedback; interaction; tertiary education; workforce.

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Introduction

In this paper, we argue that education and its implicit assessment processes should foster a deep interaction between teachers and students, instead of being focused on classical teaching methods. Therefore, students should be more and more involved in the teaching-studying-learning-assessment process. We agree with Rita Pierson (2013) when she states that the value and importance of human connection matters the most in education through fostering relationships, which are, in our opinion, a rarely discussed aspect. No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship. Our article develops Pamfil's (2006) concept of "knowing how to learn", and implicitly, how to assess. Assessment strategies used in the education process could be divided into three major phases of which a teacher has to be aware. A teacher should not only transmit theoretical information to students (the knowledge, the "savoir"), for the students to memorize and reproduce it, but a teacher has to (re)direct students' knowledge towards:

i. the "savoir faire" ("knowing how to do") – which means that a student has not (just) to learn a piece of information by heart, but also, he/she must know what to do with it (how to use it, how to apply it, etc.);

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- ii. the “savoir-être” (“knowing how to be”) – which states that a student has to improve/upgrade his/ her set of values after getting into contact with the information delivered by the teacher (moral and spiritual values to be taken into consideration) and
- iii. the “savoir-devenir” (“knowing how to become”) – which leads/guides the student towards an ideal prototype of a human being in life that makes him/her fully accomplished from a complex point of view in society (Pamfil, 2006).

1. *Interaction in assessing*

The process of assessment is considered in this paper in terms of reaction, namely as an integral stage of any learning session, which accelerates both the progress of understanding and 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). From the beginning, a clear distinction is made between evaluation and feedback. Feedback is seen as an instrumental part of an efficient communication process that aims at self-regulating and rebalancing a system by modifying a type of behavior in the long run. Therefore, in this article, assessment is seen 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 that the trainer should have 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) may generate an erroneous perception of the performance 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 actively involved students, nor to those who have low performances 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 in the long run. According to current research, these skills have a direct impact on the prospects of future graduates' employability (Kubota, 2011). Therefore, developing and improving skills in any field is related to offering and accepting efficient assessments, by guiding students to be self-aware of their level of performance at a specific moment.

Building a relationship is either an intrinsic quality within a person, or it is not. We share Stephen Covey's vivid idea who said that “you ought to just throw in a few simple things, like seeking first to understand, as opposed to being understood”³. In her TED Talk, Rita Pierson offers two examples of how a teacher can raise the self-esteem of a trainee and their academic achievement at the same time. The first example is related to a teaching episode in her career when she had to teach a math lesson on ratios. She confessed that she had never been good at math, but that she had been working on it. When she arrived back home, after the class, she looked at that teaching lesson plan and realized that she had taught the whole lesson wrong. So, coming back to class, the following day, she said: “Look, guys, I need to apologize. I taught the whole lesson wrong. I am so sorry.” Her students replied: “That's okay, Ms. Pierson. You were so excited, we just let you go.” When an adult acknowledges s/he was wrong in front of a student, when s/he offers him/herself feedback, the student's own self-esteem increases. The second example brings out the moment when Rita Pierson gives a 20-question quiz to her students. A student missed 18. She marks the student's paper with a +2 and adds a big smiley face. The student wonders if the mark is “F” (i.e., insufficient) and Pierson affirms. At the student's wonder at the big smiley face next to the unfortunate mark, the teacher replies:

“Because you are on a roll. You got 2 rights, you didn't miss them all. And when we review this, won't you do better?”

Feeling encouraged and stimulated, the student confirms: *“Yes, Madame, I can do better!”*. Rita Pierson's conclusion is that “minus 18” sucks all the life out of you, while “plus 2” says “it isn't all

³ Stephen Covey in Rita Pearson, 2013.

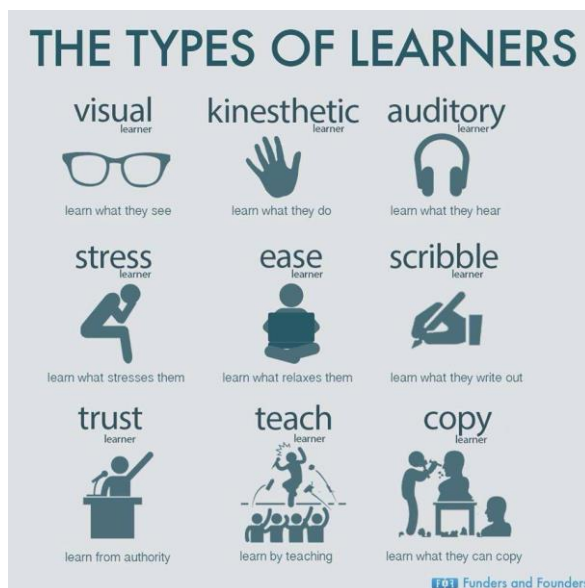
bad”. Again, seeing a positive aspect when there might be none, may be a learning incentive, and constructive assessment can be another way of transmitting and assimilating correct information. Skills related to receiving and offering feedback can be developed during classes by presenting students short-stories/pictures/paintings or videos, etc. with deep meaning. These examples can help students see beyond the (academic) analysis and reveal the true meaning of allegorical interpretations such as “Teachers open the door, but you have to enter by yourself.” (Chinese proverb).

1.1.Types of assessment

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

In terms of purpose, the 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, assessment can be completed through final exams, surveys, projects, term papers, portfolios, etc. During a formative assessment, the purpose is to gather feedback in order to improve both the learner’s and trainer’s performances in the learning process. It can be based on different learning styles and it can include quizzes, homework, essay, observation activities, interviews, etc.

Figure 1: Types of learners



In terms of a learner-centered education system, based on specific types of learners (see *Figure 1*) assessment is lined up with the critical knowledge and skills that guide each learner towards mastery of agreed know-hows. The primary types of assessment are threefold: *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 over 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 self-examination, made by the learner him/herself. It helps the learner understand what to do in order to become better, to reach self-improvement, during a metacognition process.

Strictly referring to the second type of assessment, several taxonomies and typologies have been developed to classify and explain the different aspects of assessment 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 to the labor environment, with an emphasis on improving communication at the workplace (Westerman, Heuett, Reno, Curry, 2014).

The docimology paradigms distinguish between (1) comparative assessment - comparing and classifying students, according to the level of success; (2) assessment by objectives or based on criteria - provides functional information about students, relating them to objectives and standards & offering improvement solutions; (3) corrective assessment - provides the student with additional information, to facilitate the learning process; and (4) conscious or formative assessment, which integrates assessment into the learning process. It is during this stage that the student takes control over his/her training process. (Potolea, Manolescu, 2006, 6 in Cucoş, 2008, 32)

1.2. Providing feedback

Most classifications propose a dichotomous approach to the notion of feedback. Thus, they differentiate between positive types of feedback and negative types 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. Accordingly, feedback should be given and assessments should be performed according to each student's personality and learning style.

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 successful.

The barriers to understanding during effective communication make the difference between what is understood as compared to what is transmitted. Therefore, the feedback provider should state his/her point of view and then ask the beneficiary for an opinion. A functional model of dialogue could be:

"You have heard my opinion about the activity you 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. Another type of feedback is normative, focusing on the conative and affective aspects of learning and practice in the educational environment. It is focused on the orientation towards performance, by issuing value judgments, formal or informal, explicit or implicit. (El Tatawy, 2002).

For instance, in the field of teaching 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 teacher's reactions towards the learner. A formal indication may be a grade in the register book. 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 proficiency.

2. *How to efficiently and contextually assess for learning in a foreign language class*

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 themselves and what they can offer, through a process of self-awareness and self-evaluation. This type of feedback can be seen as formal or informal evaluation.

It should not be overlooked that feedback is provided for a beneficiary to motivate and assist in the improvement of a skill or type of behavior and not 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. If the focus is only on the specific description of a

behavior and on the negative implications that action can have, feedback is more likely to be successful.

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, planning must be made 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 the individual and group level, as well as the performance following feedback. These procedures will stimulate the 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.

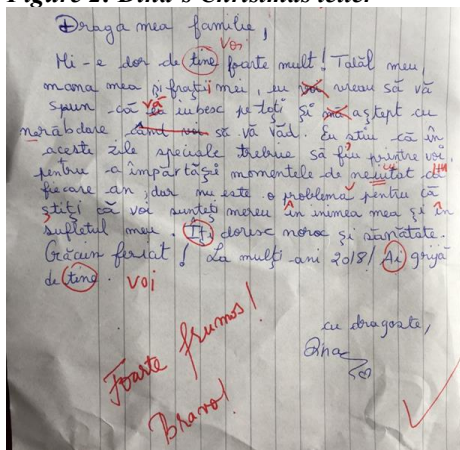
2.1. Intercultural and creative activities as assessment methods

The first part of this research section presents six formal and non-formal didactic activities for offering feedback to students who study Romanian as a foreign language in the “Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for International Students” (APLR), within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE). The second part of this research section presents two creative formative assessment activities and one creative corrective assessment activity, applied to students who study French as a foreign language in the Faculty of International Business and Economics (REI), in both International Business and Economics and Applied Modern Languages (LMA) study programs, within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE).

The main aim of these activities is to emphasize the concept of offering multicultural feedback. APLR students share one main characteristic, namely, they come from all over the world (i.e. Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Bulgaria, Turkey, Serbia, France, Italy, USA, Albania, Israel, Vietnam, China, etc.) and this fact enables teachers to organize different activities centered on intercultural added value, as forms of assessment:

- i. Organizing a Christmas party for international students is always an appropriate opportunity for them to prepare traditional dishes and to present traditional dances from their own country. It is also a good chance to point out similarities and differences between our country, Romania, and their own. During these types of events, they receive non-formal feedback, offered either by the teacher, or by their peers, during and after the activities they participate in.
- ii. PowerPoint presentations delivered by foreign students about their own civilization, culture, language, habits, important places to visit etc. The presentations accompanied by photos, audio or video recordings should be a practical invitation to know (better) each other's country and to wish to visit it one day. At the end of the presentations, students answer the teacher's questions in Romanian and the assessment is constructive and functional in terms of language and content.
- iii. Students writing a Christmas card. This is an activity that enriches students' creativity and, at the same time, is a suitable method to find information about their traditions and habits.

Figure 2: Dina's Christmas letter



Source: Authors' personal archive

the same time, is a suitable method to find information about their traditions and habits.

For instance, Dina was a student in the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language, in 2017-2018. In the Christmas Card that she wrote to her family, it is noticeable that she has learned Romanian well. The message is correctly transmitted. Although there are some grammar mistakes, these do not hinder the overall message.

iv. Knowing each student better through their **National Days**. On 9th March 2018 one of the APLR Libanese students, Hawraa offered her Romanian teacher a blue-bell flower together with a short note: “Happy birthday on our National Teachers’ Day”. These are good examples to make an intercultural comparison

between National and International Holidays and also to find out the way in which these days are celebrated in different countries. Assessment takes place during the debates that take place after the students' presentations of their national festivities.

v. Stories can be easily used as both intercultural activities and as assessment methods. For instance, reading the story of *Memnon's statue*⁴ (Curticăpeanu, 2005-6), which appears in one of Miron Costin's discourses addressed to the Lord of Moldova on Christmas, in 1676. Miron Costin takes into consideration as a bibliographical source the work of Tacitus, *Anale*, 2,61. The legend speaks about "The Kind Man" [„omul de omenie” (Romanian), „honnête homme” (French)]. Namely, for Miron Costin, kindness was represented by Memnon's stone statue. The legend says that Memnon is the son of Aurora, the Morning Goddess, and he is killed by Achilles in Troja. His mother takes care of his dead body and begs Zeus to make him immortal. Therefore, Zeus transforms him into a statue. The legend relates that when the statue is touched by the first rays of the morning sun, it makes a mumbling sound similar to that of a human being. This is the way in which Memnon answers his mother every morning, consoling her. Several questions related to the story can be asked in order to stress different meanings and symbols specific to the country from where each foreign student is:

- (1) What does the statue / the stone could symbolize in your culture?
- (2) Who is the Morning Goddess in your civilization?
- (3) How do you interpret the meaning of the idea that *the stone started to talk, to speak*?
- (4) What type of life lesson do you think the Statue of Memnon offers? Why? etc.

vi. The following example relates creative activities to translation activities. This assessment method requires students to translate poems from English into Romanian. It has proven to be a prolific activity for Khaled Ziani, an APLR alumnus (2018-2019). He is doing his post-doctoral research in Bucharest in the field of pharmacy. He writes poems in English, French and in May 2018 he wrote his second poem in Romanian. As an example, the following poem was firstly written in Romanian, and then translated into English. Afterwards, Khaled was asked to translate it into Romanian again, for the teacher to easily notice the similarities and the differences regarding metaphorical language and metaphorical skills. The poem is entitled: *The swan neck (Gâtul de lebădă)*, (Mihăilă, 2020).

Figure 3. Example of classroom feedback activity - translating poems from English to Romanian
Translated from English (Silviu Mihăilă's version) to Romanian by Khaled Ziani

GÂTUL DE LEBĂDĂ	THE SWAN NECK	Gâtul de lebădă
(original version of Silviu Mihăilă's poem, in Romanian)	(translated into English by Silviu Mihăilă)	(re-translated into Romanian by Khaled Ziani)
Pot să te sărut peste tot, știu - centimetru cu centimetru măsuram zi de zi fiecare bucățiță din tine; cu buzele scriam mii de poezii pe gâtul tău de lebădă ca un apus de primăvară impresionist. Ce nu știu și nu voi ști niciodată e cum să tatuez uitarea pe gâtul tău acum întrebător	I can cover you in kisses centimetre by centimetre – I know it I used to explore every part of your body day by day; I used to engrave/ carve/ paint with my lips thousands of poems on your swan neck as it would be an impressionist spring sunset. What I don't know and I will never know is how to engrave/ carve/ tattoo oblivion now on your suspicious swan neck still bent so close	Te pot acoperi în sărutări centimetru cu centimetru – știu asta am explorat zi de zi fiecare parte a corpului tău; am gravat / sculptat / vopsit cu buzele mele mii de poezii pe gâtul tău de lebădă cum ar fi un apus impresionist de primăvară ce nu știu și ce nu voi ști niciodată este cum să gravez / cioplesc / uit tatuajul acum? pe gâtul tău suspect de lebădă

⁴ The didactic symbolism of Memnon's statue was also discussed in Silviu Mihăilă's article, *Modele de conduită umană în literatura română veche. Un posibil scenariu didactic*, in „Dialogos”, vol. XV, 29, Buchaerst, ASE Publishing House, 2014, pp.84-96, ISSN: 1582-165X, <http://www.dialogos.rei.ase.ro/29/10-S.Mihaila.pdf>.

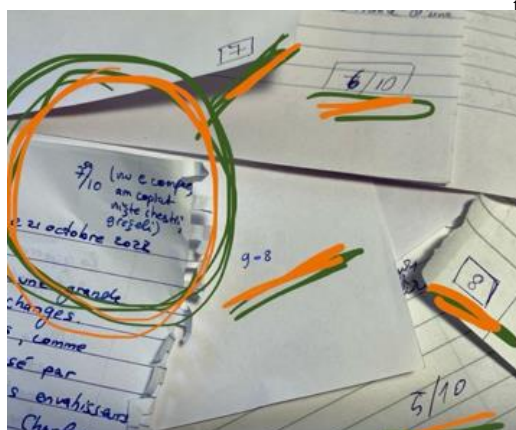
aplec atât de aproape încă de inima mea - mai aproape	to my heart – closer than the distance between two eye blinkings.	încă atât de la inima mai aproape decât distanța între doi ochi care clilesc...
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Source: Authors' personal archive

The first creative formative assessment activity is a “running dictation” exercise, in the form of a “dictée en français”. The teacher sticks several copies of a printed text in different places in the classroom. Students, divided into groups, have to write, under the dictation of a peer, the same text in their copybooks. The assessed language skills are reading and comprehension, spelling and writing. At the end of the exercise, the text is read again and corrected with the whole group.

A second type of activity related to creative formative assessment is the creation of a role-play on different economic topics, such as “how to increase sales of a specific product” or “what to say doing a job interview”. Students, divided in groups, are asked to imagine that they work for an international company and that they have to solve a problem. They are requested to organize a briefing, a brainstorming, and then to create a dialogue based on their discussion. The communication soft skills that are assessed are suggesting, proposing, accepting, and refusing proposals, and the use of language targeting the vocabulary of advertisement and particular grammar structures in French.

Figure 3: Test papers: corrective assessment & self-evaluation



Source: Authors' personal archive

One example of corrective assessment metamorphosized by the end in a self-evaluation exercise is shown by mid-term, corrective and formal tests given to students in their first and second year of the Applied Modern Languages program (LMA students), within the Faculty of International Business and Economics (REI), of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), for the French Morphology and Francophone Culture and Civilization courses. The assessed skills refer to previously acquired specific knowledge. After the test papers are given and collected, the students are requested to search for the correct answers. During the next learning session, they are given back the tests and asked to check, correct and mark them, together with the teacher who shows them the correct answers. Not surprisingly, LMA students are fair play with themselves and grade their own tests correctly and ethically. They acknowledge their own mistakes and even admit to not having written the whole necessary information in their

answers. None of them has graded his/her test paper with 10 out of 10, with marks ranging from 5 to 9 out of 10. The test papers are afterwards corrected by the teacher who checks both possible unseen mistakes and the first correction made by the student.

2.2.Survey to assess creative assessment methods

The above assessment methods were evaluated by students themselves in a survey on their insights. The survey was sent to 107 students and we received 68 responses, of which: 24 Romanian REI ASE students, 3rd year; 22 Romanian REI ASE students, 2nd year; 1 Vietnamese REI ASE student, 3rd year; 20 Romanian LMA REI ASE students, 1st year; 1 student from Lebanon, 1st year, REI ASE.

The first question (Q1) referred to students' personal data, such as study program and year. The second question is Q2. “Do you consider that assessment is a widespread feature of social, professional and personal life? If your answer is yes, can you please explain why?” received a

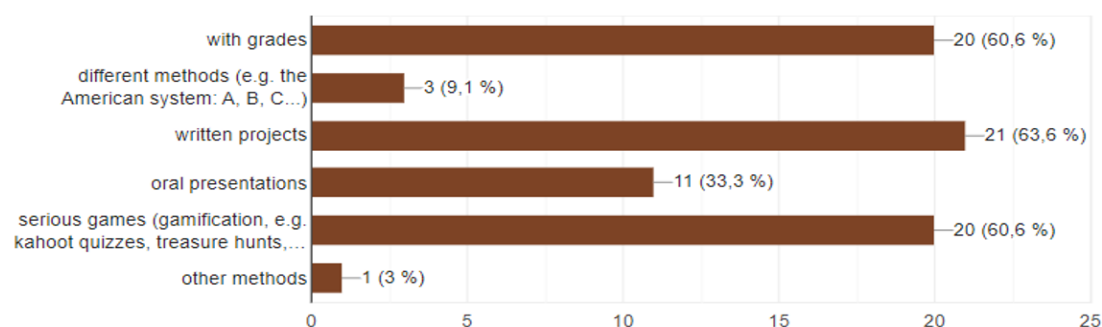
percentage of 100% positive answers, which is an argument for the introductory premises of this research.

The third question, Q3, “Do you think assessment should be mandatory or optional in the educational system? Why?” 68% stated that assessment should be mandatory, while only 32% considered that it should be optional. Some particularly insightful open answers have been identified. Respondent no.13 stated that: “Assessment is mandatory as laziness and last-minute deadlines will install into the student's rhythm of life. I personally need motivation and a strict program in order to be able to perform.” Respondent no. 21 also affirmed that assessment should be mandatory, as “nobody is perfect and students need to be given feedback so they don’t make the same mistakes”. The survey question “What do you prefer: a summative assessment (applied at the end of a period of teaching to measure the outcome of student learning, such as a test or an exam) or a formative assessment (applied during the learning process to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student achievement, such as impromptu quizzes, role plays, interactive games) and why?” brings about students’ preference for formative assessment. A percentage of 87,6% stated this as their favored form of assessment, while only 3 students would choose a summative assessment type, and other 3 students both sorts. The answers to Q7 (see Figure 4) express students’ preference for grades given for written projects rather than for oral presentations.

Figure 4: Survey question no. 7

Q7 How would you like to be evaluated/assessed?

You may check multiple options, if necessary:



Source: Authors’ research survey on assessment

A percentage of 60.6% of all respondents also confirms this research hypothesis that students favor educational gamification, such as “Kahoot” quizzes or “treasure hunt” types of exercises. Answers to Q8 show that most students prefer both written and oral exams (45.5%), 36.4% have a preference for written examinations, whereas, because of anxiety, only 18,2% would take an oral examination. Most of them (61%) consider an evaluation as a form of acquiring and reinforcing their knowledge of a particular topic (Q9). All answers to this research survey pointed that students consider assessment and offering feedback as compulsory for the educational system, and that they prefer constructive evaluation methods.

Conclusions

In this paper we have defined the terms *assessment* and *feedback*, focusing on the purpose of this process in learning and outlining its positive aspects. We have offered a classification of the concept followed by the enumeration of its stages and the need to provide effective feedback, both in a learning and a business environment. In conclusion, effective assessment and feedback are essential components 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 point of view while considering different perspectives and suggesting and looking for solutions, stimulates self-reflection, offering perspectives to our actions.

All in all, we do believe that “education is the most powerful weapon that one can use to change the world” (Nelson Mandela), being convinced at the same time that each student is unique and the role of a teacher is to offer him/her wings to fly. But flying has to be learned and practiced by each of them all alone.

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