Assessing Assessment
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The origin of the word “assessment” is the Latin term assidere, which means “to sit beside.”

Why assessing assessment? On the one hand, I like puns on words and I liked this one. Yet, the real reason behind the choice of the title of my talk is that I am convinced of the need we teachers have to constantly revise our professional practice in general, and to evaluate and rethink about the way we “assess” students. Why, again? Because the way we assess our pupils’ work and the way we give feedback to them have a powerful impact on our learners inside and outside the classroom.

When coming to assessment we may naturally think about concepts such as continuous, ongoing or formative assessment vs. summative assessment, assessment tools, peer assessment, validity and reliability and feedback among others. The aim of this session is to go through these issues but, above all, to discuss and evaluate different formative assessment strategies and feedback and appraisal techniques in order to foster not only our students’ interest in the learning of the language but also their progress in broader educational and social aspects.

Hattie (2009) clearly states, “Feedback is seen as a primary component in formative assessment and as one of the factors that have the strongest influence on learning”. It is based on this assumption that we will go through and analyze the concepts of formative assessment and feedback and the strong interrelation and relevance they have in the teaching-learning process.

Formative assessment is also known as ongoing or continuous assessment since teachers use it to check on the progress of their students to then use this information for future teaching, being “future teaching”, hopefully, the following lesson already or even result in a change in the course of the day’s lesson to take remedial action. Some examples of formative assessment could be informal quizzes and tasks such as written exercises, games, dramatizations or simply oral discussions to mention some.

Passing now onto feedback, I must say that I like to think of feedback in terms of “goals”, “medals” and “missions” as Petty (2004) does. Feedback in this way should be descriptive and
help the learner to know what he is expected to achieve (goal), where he is and what he has been able to achieve in relation to the goal (medal) and it should finally help the learner to find ways to close the existing gap (mission).

Teachers must be clear about expectations so that students know what we want from them ahead of time.

It is crucial to remind ourselves of the importance both formative assessment and formative feedback have as tools to deepen understanding, to help students to become more responsible and to foster learning when properly done or to hinder it when ineffectively carried out.

Brookhart (2010) remarks that “[g]ood feedback is feedback students both understand and can use to improve”. It is relevant to highlight again that feedback should be descriptive or verbal, both in oral or written forms. Teachers should avoid just saying things like: Well done! Great job! Poor, Incomplete or Try harder. If we want learners to be able to make changes and improve on their performance, in order to help them and guide them effectively we must tell students what it is that makes the work satisfactory or poor or even incomplete. We must state and describe what is good or bad, depending on the case. As Brookhart says, “Descriptive feedback gives students the power to change” and enhances learning.

When evaluating the way we give and use feedback, it could be helpful to reflect about the following issues: Did students benefit from my feedback? Was it clear and specific enough? As regards assessment: Is it really ongoing? Do I use assessment to modify my teaching practice, even in the middle of a class if necessary?

Research shows that learners of all ages, especially the (so called) low-achievers, can profit highly from formative assessment and from positive and timely formative feedback or feel
easily frustrated and thus unmotivated to learn when assessment is not frequent enough or feedback is scarce or wrongly given.

It is relevant here to mention that we should mostly assess students according to what they are capable of doing and not against the group as a whole. We should value and praise even small attainments and attempts knowing that positive reinforcement even of small achievements can bring about benefits in the students’ performance within the language class and in other spheres of life.

Yet, when giving compliments, we must be cautious and not lie or overdo it since students will probably realize it and might resent it, this being counterproductive in the teaching-learning process.

To round off, it is relevant to restate the huge effect formative assessment and formative feedback have on students’ performance quality. Several authors agree that a student could learn without receiving summative assessment but he could scarcely succeed without positive reinforcement from a significant other, without ongoing assessment or without formative feedback. Therefore, we teachers must be fully aware that these three elements, positive reinforcement, ongoing assessment and formative feedback can motivate or demotivate learners and positively or negatively impact in their lives inside and outside the school environment.

In other words, deliberately strengthening the practice of formative assessment and formative feedback produces significant and often substantial learning gains in all students.

Now following Petty’s pattern...a goal: to frankly “assess” the way in which you “assess” and give feedback to your students, a medal: congratulations on all the good you have caused in this sense, a mission: discard the practices which you suspect may be counterproductive or hinder learning inside and outside the classroom, and last but not least...keep on enjoying being a teacher...that makes most of the secret.