

## **Evaluation in the teaching/ learning process of foreign languages: the case of higher education business programmes**

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**Abstract:** *An essential element of the teaching practice, student assessment has individualizing features in the language teaching / learning progress. This article aims at optimizing the evaluation process, by analyzing both its positive and undesirable effects. Integrating the theoretical background of the documents developed by the Council of Europe into language teaching practice can have a formative, evaluative and self-evaluative benefit. The switch of the assessment actors (teachers evaluated by the students) aims at adapting the didactic strategies to real situations while preserving the principles and the values system.*

**Keywords:** *assessment, evaluator, didactics, teaching strategy, educational system, objectivity, competences*

### **1. Assessment – a fundamental element of the didactic process**

At all levels of any educational system, evaluation (in addition to objectives, content, methods etc.) is an essential component of the didactic process, featuring emblematic characteristics that distinguish it from the other fields of social life where it is frequently encountered. Preliminary actions imply setting the purposes and the objectives of the assessment, as well as the mitigating measures stemming from its results. The role of the teacher is essential in the evaluation of the obtained data and of the conclusions drawn. In addition, it is fundamental for the adjustment of the students' behaviour, as it might also require the adjustment of the initial objectives, of the didactic material and of the teaching techniques and, not least, of the teacher's own behaviour. "In this process, the teacher is the keeper of the values and norms governing the interpersonal academic space, therefore he epitomizes authority and holds power. [...] The evaluation is rationally based on the appraisal results, on the pedagogical norms and principles, but it also has subjective roots, depending on the values, on the pedagogical vision, on the beliefs or stereotypes of the evaluator, which are difficult to recognize and manage."(Cocoradă, 2008: 84)

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Numerous theoretical and practical attempts have been made in order to transform the evaluation into an objective approach and they seem to have failed. What we need to avoid, since it is perceived as related to microviolence, is not necessarily the subjectivity of the evaluation process, but its arbitrary character: the assessment which is not based on a conscious and rigorous approach. For a student who is evaluated, the goals of this process are motivational, related to orientation, to training and ability improvement, as well as to acknowledging one's own possibilities. Transmitting the results of the assessment can bring about positive effects if the „communication is concise and the message is comprehensible, predominantly positive, with focus on the achieved goals [...]. The communication of an unfavourable assessment will be carried out on the background of positive valorisation and will indicate the suitable solutions.” (Cocoradă, 2003, 142) As an evaluation strategy, the three-step evaluation model is the most commonly used and it results from the successiveness of the components of the teaching process, consisting of the initial assessment, the on-going evaluation and the final assessment. In the following, we will focus on the different types of assessment in the field of foreign language teaching / learning during the academic years of the students in the higher economic education. Among the initial purposes of the evaluation, we notice that of determining and evaluating the proficiency level acquired during high school education. This step takes place prior to forming the language groups, at the beginning of the first academic year, according to the principle of continuity and based on the interests of the student. On average, high schools in Romania prepare their students for a maximum B2 level. According to the assessment grid of the linguistic competences provided by the European Framework of Reference for Languages, Level B2 requires the common understanding and ability to converse, the ability to issue an opinion, to systematically support a reasoning, to easily communicate spontaneously with a native speaker. (CECRL, 2000) During the initial assessment phase, the teacher encounters mainly grammar deficiencies and the lack of confidence in oral communication (the latter may be a consequence of shyness, taking into account the context of the new collective in which communication takes place). The high degree of diversity determined by the specificity and proficiency level of the classes from which the students come, their experiences regarding the assessment process, their geographical areas of origin, their behaviour etc., all these are challenges that can be used in an informative assessment in order to forecast the needs and future availability of the learners. In addition to the methods of this initial assessment used for diagnosing the weak points, the objectives also prove to be relevant: the evaluation of the amount of knowledge previously assimilated and their instrumental value, the capacity to use the acquired language skills in professional or day-to-day situations, the importance of motivation in studying a foreign language for economic purposes (the motivation being one of the basic components of supporting the entire teaching activity). The formative assessment takes place throughout the entire process of the language

teaching / learning and plays a regulator role in the evaluation of the ongoing training. It is a dynamic assessment, conducted during constant seminar work, especially for oral competence, targeting the objectives of each seminar. Often, oral assessment can be better structured if the teacher creates support for: correspondence between questions and answers; understanding a real, professional situation, represented by images (understanding the message / situation). Business situations in the economic field are addressed: business relations, behaviour towards customers, business correspondence, tourism and services, marketing studies, offer and request etc.); continuous check of pronunciation, intonation and lexicon (the vocabulary should not contain any inexistent words in the target language or loan translations from the mother tongue; students will be well graded for a diversified vocabulary, especially in the economic field, when simulating a professional situation requiring a specific approach); syntax (word order); and last but not least observing the communication strategy of the responding student. In the practice of linguistic competence evaluation, undesirable behaviours from the teacher may occur, with negative effects on the teaching process: it does not help the evaluated student to elaborate correct or complete answers, the teacher might be less exigent in formulating the questions (which may lead to inadequate answers) or may transform clarification questions into ticklers, he/she might underestimate slow or shy students or overestimate extroverted students. The advantages of the continuous oral assessment are that it makes the class more dynamic, it provides tools for correcting the mistakes, it leads to self-evaluation and helps memorizing the correct answers. During classes, the students' attitude towards communication changes, along with their hesitations rooted in their own personality or deficiencies, and they become more open to dialogue, by approaching an articulated and well-argued point of view.

Concerning the grading system, students can be stimulated with extra points added to the final grade for their seminar work. In order to increase interest in the foreign language, the teacher can choose topics at students' request or they could set voluntary assignments such as portfolios or referrals based on the themes discussed, as an alternative to the final exam. These alternative methods increase the objectivity of evaluation, require time planning and effort management, therefore the formative valences are stronger. Their impact on the entire teaching process should be positive, increasing the capacity of volunteer work. The quality of their work becomes a criterion of the assessment. Voluntary projects (essays, case studies, portfolios, text translations etc.) are an alternative to the final exam and encourage students' active participation in tasks, increase self-control, promote improvement of the individual work, develop positive attitudes toward their own endeavour and respect for intellectual property. The works will be evaluated according to a set of criteria established by mutual consent, following an anticipative, inductive or deductive approach. The shortcomings of this evaluation system might come from the students' lack of critical spirit in the information processing, which transforms their work into a compilation, a collage of quotations, or a fabricated self-

presentation (by transferring the task to another person who is deemed more competent). The final assessment has a revision purpose, focusing on language acquisition along the semester and on consolidating the previously-acquired knowledge. In order to have a positive character, it should not be confused with control. The final assessment, if written, involves a pre-arranged framework (date, time, room), the working time and the grading scale being announced from the beginning, and, above all, it covers a previously studied and reviewed syllabus. It focuses on the student's progress and knowledge gained, on their skills in doing intellectual work, but it is limited by the teacher's impossibility to correct the deficiencies. The final goal of studying a foreign language during the four semesters in the economic higher education is to achieve the level of competence C1, which implies the understanding of a wide range of difficult texts with their subtle implications, along with fluent spontaneous oral and written communication. Each final evaluation will focus on improving language skills in order to communicate effectively and naturally in the social and professional life.

## **2. Improving the assessment process**

Vasile Pavelcu (1968: 94) affirms, with statistical arguments, the “indubitable existence of a subjectivity coefficient” interpreted as an “expression of the structure of personality” and manifested as an “individual grading scale”. For explaining the subjectivity coefficient, the author invokes temperamental and character particularities, the ability to judge people and the attitude towards one’s own discipline.

In other words, being a good teacher is a necessary condition for being a good examiner. Such an evaluation must be only positive, must encourage and support the students’ efforts to learn, without giving the impression that the course is hostile, lowering the students’ self-esteem or provoking anxiety to the evaluated student, inevitable consequences of an abuse of power. Such faults can occur in the formative evaluation. Final evaluations have to be prepared through reviewing the previously taught syllabus, the specific objectives, emphasising the essential elements for each subject and preparing them in advance and the presentation of the evaluation criteria. Final examinations dates are preset on mutually agreed dates between the teacher and the students and the preparation for the evaluation becomes thus an objective of the learning process. It will have practical uses by making the students aware of their responsibilities and by offering them the skills needed to prepare for a job interview, an important business meeting, for the preparation on an event etc. The evaluation style of the teacher can boost or hinder the students’ desire to learn. According to Elena Cocoradă (2003, pp. 147-148), there are four evaluation styles that each sum the two poles of the objectivity degree (lenience / severity) and of the appreciation criterion (focused on the norm / focused on the individual):

normative, formative, populist and conventional. Normative evaluators are driven strictly by the grading system, their benchmarks are strict, the criteria are stable and previously announced, they rarely give stimulating grades and they are tough on errors. Formative evaluators take into account the needs and potential of the students. They evaluate periodically, are emphatic, realistic and flexible. Those belonging to the populist category are the ones most loved by the students, their tests are easy, they often improvise and the cordial classroom climate camouflages not reaching the objectives. The teachers developing a conventional style have a tendency to favour proven methods, they are not emphatic and prefer to evaluate knowledge. Their tests have medium difficulty and their criteria are rigid. Each of the above styles has its pluses and minuses, but essential in the evaluation process is the situational adaptability of these styles. In the formative evaluation, where individual shortcomings can be detected (grammar or pronunciation/intonation mistakes, vocabulary gaps, syntax errors), the flexible approach seems to be beneficial. In the final evaluation, where there is also a ranking in grading, rational strictness, specific to the normative and conventional styles, is preferable. Self-evaluation is an active factor in stimulating the learning activity. It adjusts the inherent motivation, increases personal autonomy and creates the consciousness of one's own cognitive capacity. The emergence of the „Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” and of the „European Language Portfolio” represented an opening of new perspectives in the teaching of foreign languages. The issue of a common European evaluation, based on transparency and coherence, that brings common recognition of the six accepted levels of competence is of the utmost importance for achieving the objectives of the European common language policy. The theoretical support of the documents developed by the Council of Europe (*CEFR* and *ELP*) brings great benefits and have a pedagogical impact at the formative, evaluative and self-evaluative levels. The integration of these resources in the pedagogical practice is a way of optimising the evaluation processes. Another perspective on the approach for improving assessment in higher education is given by the evaluation of teachers. The teacher evaluates the students and, in their turn, the students evaluate the teacher. By having a platform for quality assurance in the university education the roles change and, from evaluatees, the students become evaluators. The platform assures the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents and the teachers' access to the results is in the sole purpose of obtaining feedback about the quality of the teaching processes. Although the answers to the questionnaires are subjective to a high extent and the number of students that access the platform is not always relevant this method is considered a good measure for the teacher-student relationship. The reflection of the educator on the results can help reducing negative effects and finding prevention strategies and educational partnerships. Adaptation to real life situations, as well as maintaining principles and values system, will instil respect and create a spiral of good results. The evaluation of the teachers can also occur retroactively, when the graduate

students confront to real life and professional situations and retrospect to those who guided them. Teachers fulfil their career through the success of their students.

### 3. Conclusions

The ultimate goal of the evaluation process is to make decisions leading to the improvement the assessed activity. Preparing for the evaluation becomes an objective of learning, with roots in the further development of adult behaviour towards any evaluation system. The positive effects should not be affected by possible faults in the examiner's technique. Assessment should not be arbitrary (but a conscious and rigorous approach), as it might be perceived as microviolence. Alternative assessment methods increase students' awareness and self-control, develop positive attitudes towards their own work and respect for intellectual property. Self-evaluation builds self-esteem and is a driving force in the educational process. The assessment of teachers carried out by the students generates feedback, necessary for optimizing the evaluation process and leads to an educational partnership. Teachers' ability to adapt to real situations while preserving the principles and the system of values becomes a must do.

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