

# FORMATIVE STRATEGIES FOR EVALUATING LANGUAGE COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION BUSINESS PROGRAMMES

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**Abstract:** *Evaluation does not represent an objective per se, but the strategies adopted in this process may take the teaching/learning process in different directions, according to the students' language needs and to the competences that should be developed. The phenomenon is a complex one, sometimes comprising errors, which, nevertheless, contribute to progress, it gives precise clues and helps in identifying the positives and negatives in foreign language learning. The higher education system in Romania is adjusted to the quantitative and qualitative exigency of the European administration, with evaluation always accompanying the learning process, having both diagnostic and prognostic characteristics. The evaluation strategy predicts the most appropriate methodical path which ensures efficiency in approaching specific teaching and learning situations.*

**Key words:** *challenges, strategies, methods, evaluation, higher education*

## 1. Introduction

Mastering at least one foreign language has become, in present day Romania, a commonality, a matter of European integration of values which highlights cohesion, tolerance, interculturality and identity. Learning a foreign language is an evolutionary factor, a constancy in the informative/educational process in Romania from nursery level to academic education.

With the aim of obtaining a representative union and a harmonization of the diversity of the educational systems, European authorities elaborated as early as 2001 the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, through which the methods and objectives of learning foreign languages are reconsidered, providing a common ground for programmes, academic degrees and certificates, reviewing all linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences, mentioning and defining the six proficiency levels which allow the measuring of progress within each learning stage.

In what concerns evaluation, CEFRL proposes a common manner of positive assessment, i.e. a manner of establishing the level of language proficiency according to

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well-defined criteria, neither ideal, nor globalizing.

The measuring of the learning progress shows its advantages for both participants in the teaching/ learning process: on the one hand, it allows the teacher to evaluate his/her performance, thus reflecting upon the efficiency of his/her methods in accomplishing his/her objectives and, on the other hand, it increases students' perseverance, maintains their interest in the learning process and develops their self-esteem (Păcurari, 2003).

On the face of it, talking about language assessment means talking about measuring, but in essence it means following a purpose which supports the development of competences, regulates this purpose, avoids blockages and reluctance, builds, consolidates and guides.

According to the proficiency levels attained by students and the language needs discovered in class, the teacher builds a strategy which complies with the methods considered appropriate for evaluation, taking into account, therewith, the already set objectives. Alongside developing language competences, foreign language classes offer students the possibility to develop social skills (good citizenship, communication, empathy) and emotional skills (self-efficacy, self-knowledge, self-management and self-motivation), interaction and support, and it uses transversal competences for acquiring educational content (Abernot, 1998).

## 2. Evaluation Strategies

At present, teachers can rely on a rich, accessible and varied specialized literature, comprising theoretical syntheses and practitioners' experiences, for their foreign language classes. Necessary in every pedagogical act, the didactic strategy plays a central role in designing and organising the lesson, as a complex teaching screenplay comprising the learning environment, the objectives and methods envisaged. The strategy predicts the most appropriate methodical path which ensures efficiency in approaching real teaching and learning situations.

The conceptualization of a strategy for evaluation is mandatory, irrespective of the environment where the educational process takes place and of the subject taught. The strategy for evaluation represents an ensemble of operational decisions, supported by the assessor, with reference to:

- the forms and types of evaluation used
- methods (oral examination, written examination, through practical tasks, based on projects/ portfolio, self-evaluation)
- techniques and evaluation instruments of the learning outcomes (assessment, practical tests)
- the extent to which they comply with the objectives set (competences, proficiency)
- ways of combining the objectives and competences
- the frequency of use and the proper methods
- criteria and proficiency descriptors
- grading schemes and grading system
- the ways in which the evaluation results will be used.

The evaluation strategy represents the underlying condition for pedagogical success in any teaching activity. Its diagnosis and prognosis functions are used in a positive manner, with a view to setting objectives which consider the level reached in the learning process (at unit, chapter, semester level etc.). Evaluation focuses on the level reached in point of content, skills and cognitive strategies.

In choosing the evaluation strategies for foreign language classes taught in higher education, the evaluator should ensure that learning acquisitions comply with the goals previously set in the curriculum and syllabus, and the initial stage of course and seminar design, all in keeping with the teaching methodology and the typology of learning situations (Universitatea Babeș\_Bolyai, CIPI, 2020).

The evaluation strategy in the process of foreign language learning can follow directions such as: evaluation of factual, procedural, attitudinal or value-based knowledge, by means of attractive methods of formative and summative evaluation (Tagliante, 1991). In higher education, just like in pre-university education, the tools used in language assessment are divided into two categories: closed items (implying a short, simple answer, possibly by a tick, with the advantage of objectiveness) and open-ended items (implying longer, creative answers, subjectiveness on the part of the evaluator, the need for grading schemes) (UBB, CIPI, 2020).

Without enlarging upon the well-known topic of classical assessment tools, used according to the skills pursued, especially when it comes to acquiring specialist vocabulary in a foreign language, we only mention: multiple-choice tests, short open-ended questions, matching, grading or gap-filling exercises. As for the alternative methods, complementary to the classical assessment tools, which bring in modern means of evaluation and highlight the role and skills of the teacher in adapting teaching strategies to learning conditions, we can mention:

- The portfolio, or learning file, represents a collection of productions that contain the student's reflections and comments, and favour the development of metacognitive skills. Portfolio analysis requires a thorough focus on the productions of each student, leads to an evaluation of their progress, and highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the learning process. The main disadvantage of the method, in terms of evaluation, is that it is time-consuming and, besides, it opens up the possibility that students might use non-original productions.

- The project is a gain for summative evaluation, as it follows more complex, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Students prove the maturity of their thought, as well as their computer and internet skills by searching for sources, selecting the material, delivering oral presentations (especially via PowerPoint). They present to the entire group of students their own vision on a given topic (which develops and extends an approach taken in a previous class). The timing of the evaluation is very important, considering here not only psychologically-related aspects, but also students' specialized and in-depth knowledge. In evaluating the project, the teacher applies certain criteria, and it is advisable that evaluators present those criteria at an early stage, as they guide the student in dealing with the material (from selection and organization, to the relevance of the content with respect to the topic, to students' ability to analyse and synthesize, to the originality of the findings etc.). For groups with a

large number of students, this evaluation strategy has the disadvantage of being time-consuming (reducing the time span allotted to the teaching process). Moreover, it requires classrooms with internet access and equipped with video projectors. The major advantage, however, is that discussions and group comments on the project presented add value to the foreign language class (students prove abilities complementary to language skills, group cohesion is built through interaction, working atmosphere is lively etc.).

- Carrying out group-work or group projects brings the great benefit of consolidating teamwork and team spirit, but at the same time it is difficult for the teacher to evaluate the contribution of each individual member of the group separately. The advantage of this assessment technique is that it is time-saving.

- Computer-aided evaluation lacks subjectiveness (compared to traditional evaluation methods) and the evaluator's emotional implication. It is a method appreciated by students precisely because the result is immediate and objective; in addition, they can self-assess in the process of independent learning, benefiting from feedback, so necessary in checking their progress effectively. The advantage of this method is the time saved and the low effort on the part of the evaluator, who can reinvest the time gained from the course. However, immediate feedback can bring along certain disadvantages, such as: reduction of communication acts, simplification and restriction of areas of interest, effective focus only on some aspects of the foreign language teaching/learning process.

- Interactive methods (debates, competitions). For example, Kahoot is a learning and quiz game platform which can be used by both the evaluating teacher and the students presenting their project and wanting to check the degree to which the audience has understood their presentation. Using the game library or inventing a game based on the structure already given, the students create their own quiz in which the roles change: the evaluator becomes the evaluated, by actively participating in the quiz, as a competitor. This game stimulates the process of evaluation, brings concentration, as well as good mood to the whole group of participants, and helps students focus on the most important information.

- Quiz questions can take various forms, such as: multiple-choice questions, gap-filling questions, short open-ended questions, and can vary from student to student.

In choosing one evaluation strategy or another, be it traditional or developed through competitive, modern methods, the evaluator must always take into account the objectives of the language course: namely, the students' acquisition of both language skills and pertinent abilities to use them in real-life contexts.

### **3. Technology-based Assessment**

The Covid-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented situation in all educational structures, teachers, students, and parents alike adapting themselves on the go to a system already imperfect. In terms of academic education, things have run more smoothly, as technical facilities and knowledge, platforms already in use and educators trained in online teaching have combined in providing the proper setting for course and

seminar activities (with particular shortcomings in the case of laboratory work and practice). If the evaluation strategies for the face-to-face education system are generally established with the preparation of each course activities, the strategies for online teaching have been developed along the way, based on the 'hands-on' principle.

At this moment, the new teaching and learning experience allows stakeholders to become aware of and capitalize on a series of advantages and opportunities triggered by the very presence of the electronic environment and tools:

- time and cost saving
- an increased number of options and a greater freedom with respect to the evaluation schedule and venue
- centralised sharing of tests/ assignments
- transparency of the evaluation procedure (the procedures set by the teacher and the extent to which students comply with these procedures)
- possibility to easily store answers and to access them whenever needed
- possibility to audio and video record the evaluation process
- decreased risk of being mistaken given the automatic grading of the answers provided
- possibility to optimize and provide personalized and constructive feedback (throughout the term, by scoring students or by providing explanations),
- possibility for students to formatively capitalize on the feedback received, by re-taking and reviewing answers in light of the teacher's comments
- possibility to track progress by including a wider range of items and by evaluating more diverse learning outcomes (open-ended items, such as subjective items or projects)
- first-hand access to authentic materials (primary information sources, data bases, scientific articles, documentaries, interviews, TV programmes, advertisements etc.) (Universitatea Babeș Bolyai, CIPI, 2020).

Apart from the benefits of a technology-based evaluation system, one should also emphasize an underlying condition, i.e. the need for the quick development of both teachers' and students' digital competences, as well as the reconsideration or development of teachers' psycho-pedagogical and didactic competences.

There are risks that should be reduced or overcome in this context: the risk of cheating in the exam, technical problems that can occur during the exam, the teacher's and students' exposure, as the evaluation operation can be recorded and subsequently manipulated or altered, the increased risk of conflict caused by the transparency of the evaluation procedure which can be interpreted in various ways, cyber-bullying (can be conducive to students' limiting or even renouncing online interventions), the weak management of the students' group and certain difficulties triggered by the limited invigilation possibilities during the exam.

The genuine academic evaluation can be ensured by focusing the evaluation strategy on the degree to which students are able to use knowledge in a real or realistic context. This evaluation strategy supposes the formulation of open-ended learning and evaluation items (which allow several approaches, solutions, forms), the evaluation tasks involving higher-order thinking (critical, reflexive, creative thinking),

communication, cooperation, problem-solving, the use of various sources and of various work environments. The tasks allow the evaluation of students' transversal skills and genuine engagement in solving the tasks by involving them in real or realistic situations (tasks such as investigation projects, case studies, individual/ group projects).

The setting of an efficient evaluation strategy in the online context can rely on key-questions: Why do we evaluate online? What do we evaluate online? How do we evaluate online? How can we prevent or diminish the risks that online evaluation supposes?

#### 4. Conclusions

Although at higher education level evaluation is often assimilated to the end-of-term assessment, this single assessment is not enough for mirroring the learning outcomes and progress, either qualitatively or quantitatively. The evaluation focused on supporting learning supposes an ongoing process, consisting of actions for mediating learning by analysing students' learning route and the level attained at a given contextual didactic moment, the adaptation, improvement and development of transversal competences which are essential for future graduates (collaboration, responsibility, communication, upholding of certain values etc.). The evaluation throughout the term can resort to students' self-assessment, considering performance criteria and performance provided to students by the teacher. Thus, constructive feedback can be attained regarding the quality of the achievements and outcomes obtained. The implementation of a quality management system in higher education relies on the organization of a stimulating and interactive learning environment, which should facilitate students' engagement in their own education.

Any type of strategy used for evaluating language competences for foreign language classes in higher education has to consider the teacher's role in training students for real-life personal or professional situations, by offering students not only information, but also motivation, support and confidence. By using pertinent evaluation strategies, foreign language teachers support students' task persistence and motivation for foreign language learning. These should be adapted to the information transfer mediated by technology, which triggers a new academic pedagogy, a didactic metamorphosis, based on the advantages of digital education platforms, having interactivity at its core (the essence of student-centred teaching).

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