



Starting the School Year With Effective Assessment and Feedback

by [Débora Nacamuli Klebs](#) and [Esther Vazquez](#)

A new school year is starting, and we are all back full of energy. Because we firmly believe the way we assess students' work and the way we give feedback to them have a strong impact, both inside and outside the classroom, we would like to share some powerful ideas to help our students thrive.

In this article, we discuss and evaluate different formative assessment strategies and feedback techniques that promote not only students' interest and accuracy in the learning of the English language but also their progress in broader educational and social aspects. Hattie (2009) states that feedback is seen as a primary component of formative assessment and has a powerful influence on learning and achievement. Helpful feedback always has *emotional resonance* and is constructive while it points out areas in which performance should be improved. Based on this assumption, we go through and analyze the concepts of formative assessment and effective feedback and the strong interrelation and relevance they have in the teaching and learning process.

What Makes Good Feedback?

Our first issue is to determine what characterises constructive feedback. "Effective feedback does not do the thinking for the student" (Chappuis, 2012, p. 37) but it rather helps him or her to discover errors and to devise "tactics and strategies" (Brookhart, 2010a) to do remedial work on his or her own. Therefore, effective feedback must always be descriptive, either in oral or written form, and inform learners what their strengths are and, when necessary, point out areas to work on and suggest specific changes to make in order to facilitate the correct acquisition of the intended learning outcome. In other words, feedback needs to state with clarity what the student is doing well as well as provide tips, strategies, advice, and even examples that will lead to improvement and success.

Good Feedback Is Timely

Effective feedback is timely because it must occur during the learning, when the student still has the chance to act on it (assessment *for* learning). Additionally, it limits corrective information to an amount the student can act on, and it addresses partial understanding: If a student's work doesn't demonstrate at least partial understanding, then *reteaching*, rather than feedback, is needed (Chappuis, 2012).

Good Feedback Is Goal-Oriented

On referring to formative feedback, Petty (2009) speaks about medals, missions, and goals. Feedback should help learners to

- discover what they are expected to achieve (goal),
- understand where they are and how far they have gotten in relation to the goal (medal), and
- find ways to close the existing gap (mission).

See Figure 1.



Figure 1. Toward achieving a goal.

See Figure 2 for a possible feedback form to implement Petty's (2009) model.




 <p>You did really a good job at</p>	 <p>You need to go on working on</p>	 <p>The goal/s to achieve is/are</p>
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Figure 2. Possible feedback form.

Good Feedback Is Explicit

Our On Target form (see Figure 3), which develops from the Stars and Stairs form by Chappuis (2012), is a tool to give explicit feedback. On the form, draw an arrow on target, and next to it mention something the student has done well or describe a good feature of his or her work. Below this, draw another target with arrows at some distance from the center, along with some feature that needs improvement or correction and one or more strategies to deal with that feature.

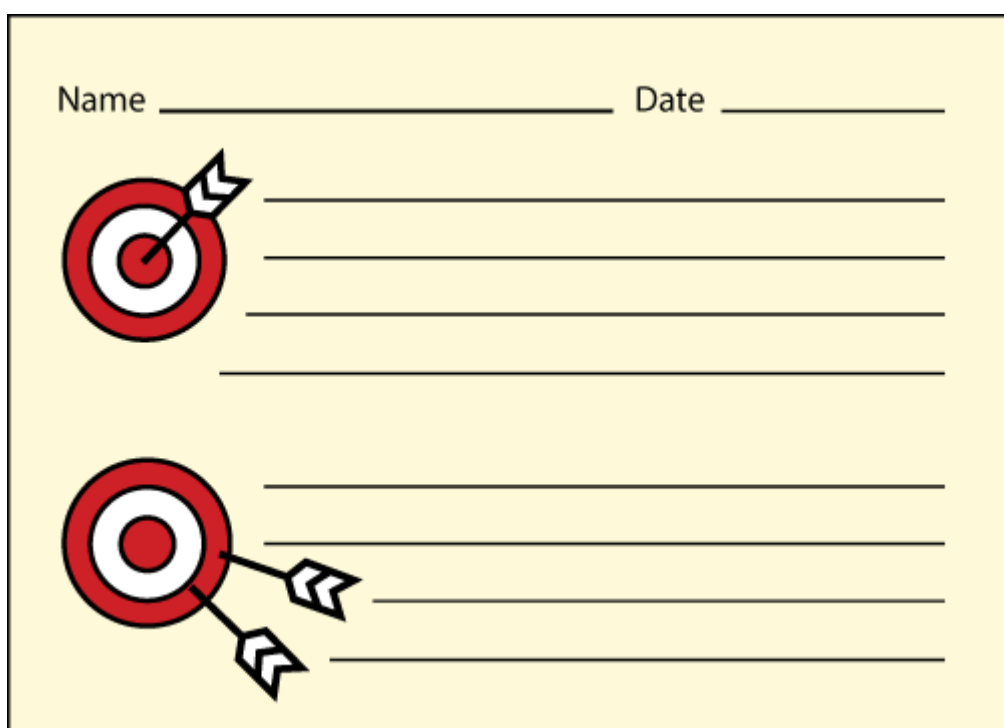
The form is a rectangular template with a light yellow background. At the top, it has two horizontal lines for 'Name' and 'Date'. Below these are two target graphics. The first target has a single arrow hitting the bullseye, followed by four horizontal lines for notes. The second target has two arrows, one hitting the bullseye and one hitting the outer ring, followed by four horizontal lines for notes.

Figure 3. On target feedback form.

Brookhart (2010a) remarks that good feedback is feedback students can not only understand but also use to improve. We'd like to highlight again that it should be descriptive, both in oral and written forms. Avoid comments such as *Well done!*, *Great job!*, *Poor*, *Incomplete* or *Try harder!* All of these phrases are just loaded with opinion and judgment but do not give students any specific information about what needs to be done to improve.

If we want learners to be able to make changes and succeed, we must be explicit about what it is that makes their work satisfactory, poor, or even incomplete. Brookhart (2010a) describes this as giving learners *the power to change*.

Good Feedback Is Sensible With Praise

Praise and value are two fundamental and empowering elements to consider. Teachers 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 judicious because students will surely be aware of embellishment and might resent it, resulting in a counterproductive effect on the teaching and learning processes.

What Is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment is also known as *ongoing* or *continuous assessment* because teachers use it to check on the progress of their students and then use the information for future teaching (Vazquez, 2014). Future teaching can mean the following lesson or even that day's lesson, if immediate remedial action seems prudent. Examples of formative assessment include informal quizzes and tasks, such as written exercises, games, dramatizations, or simply oral discussions.

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. They can also feel easily frustrated—and 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 principally assess students according to what they themselves are capable of doing and not against the whole group or an established standard, if we intend to help them achieve larger gains.

Formative Assessment Techniques

Three powerful assessment techniques we use and would like to share follow (activities collected in Rutherford & Oliver, 2008):

- **2-Minute Warning:** This technique gives learners who are taking a test a 2-minute period before the end of it to be able to consult any materials they have in order to search for that “nugget” of information they are finding difficult to recall or retrieve. As a result, because they will only be able to find information they are missing if they are well organized, students' organizational skills will be improved.
(David Baker, Longmont, CO)
- **Extra Inning:** Tell students at the end of a test that it will not be corrected and that they will be given an extra opportunity to revise, add, and/or modify any information in it during the following lesson. Learners generally concentrate on that information they could not remember to be able to add or change answers in their tests later. You may ask students to use a different colour for any change they make, though exams should get full marks for the complete work submitted.
(David Brinkley, Longmont, CO)
- **Try-Angle:** A figure of a triangle is given to (or drawn by) each student. They write (just on one side of it) information they find relevant while learning a new topic. Students are then told that they will be allowed to use this try-angle during the testing on that particular content. An advantage of this is that students will be focusing on relevant data along *all* of the teaching and learning processes.
(Sharon Boudreau, Fairfax County, VA)

A Note on Assessments

It is important to mention that you should use these or other assessment techniques alternatively and from time to time, so as to bring some brain-compatible novelty to the testing situations that may be of help for most learners, but especially for those who need some extra guidance and motivation when being evaluated.

Fostering Meaningful Learning

To round off, it is relevant to restate the huge effect formative assessment and formative feedback have on students' performance quality. Several authors (Rutherford & Oliver, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Brookhart, 2010a; Brookhart, 2010b; Chappius, 2012; Chappuis, Commodore, & Stiggins, 2017) agree that students could learn without formal tests (summative assessment) but they could scarcely succeed without

- positive reinforcement from a significant other,
- ongoing assessment, or
- formative feedback.

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

Effective assessment of students' performance and timely and proper feedback empower students to keep track of their own learning processes and, above all, foster meaningful, long-lasting learning.

Our message to all teachers following Petty's (2009) medals, missions, and goals model:

- **A Goal:** 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 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 the difference!

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***Débora Nacamuli Klebs** is a passionate teacher and teacher educator and a national and an international lecturer. She has specialized in didactics and has lectured on methodology for more than 23 years at two prestigious teacher training colleges in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has authored and coauthored several articles on the teaching field and has presented at the TESOL International Convention for the last 3 years.*

***Esther Vázquez** is an experienced teacher and teacher trainer born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Esther holds a bachelor's degree in educational management and a diploma in neurolearning and in neurodiversity. She has lectured extensively on varied topics of interest in the educational field in Argentina and internationally. In 2017, she was a presenter at the TESOL International Convention (Seattle, Washington, USA) and was awarded a TESOL Professional Development Scholarship.*