



LEARNING POINT

What is formative feedback? Why is feedback from the teacher important?

Formative feedback is an essential component in the formative assessment process. Research indicates it can be one of the practices with the highest impact on student learning and achievement outcomes when done effectively (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, not all feedback is the same, and scholars have worked to identify what types of feedback are most effective (Brookhart, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; McManus, 2008; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2005; Wiggins, 2012). Feedback is most beneficial when it is related to the learning target and identifies strengths as well as areas for growth. In this way, formative feedback supports the student to understand the learning target and develop the necessary strategies and competence to reach the target.

Formative feedback defined

Feedback can be defined as the verbal or written responses a teacher provides to students on their performance or understanding with the intention to close the gap between the student's current status and the learning target. Feedback provides useful information for the students to reflect on their learning and self-regulate their thinking processes and the strategies they use. Feedback can take many forms and serve different purposes as it is tailored to the individual student and specific learning goals. Formative feedback can provide new knowledge, clarify understanding, introduce new strategies, shift beliefs about self and tasks, and develop metacognitive skills.

Sadler (1989) delineated three necessary components of feedback: (1) the standard that is to be achieved, (2) the actual level of performance, and (3) how to go about closing the gap. These components are at the heart of the formative assessment process, and thus feedback is critical for students to understand what is needed to move their learning forward.

Formative feedback involves an ongoing cycle between teachers and students. It can take many forms in the classroom, including:

- Feedback from the teacher: verbal or written feedback to a student to improve his or her achievement of the learning target
- Feedback from peers: feedback from one student to another student

about his or her learning in relation to a learning target

- Student self-assessment: the process in which students gather information and reflect on their own learning in relation to the learning goal.

What makes feedback most effective?

Feedback from the teacher is most effective when it is descriptive; that is, it focuses on a specific task and provides information for the student to improve his or her work or understanding on the task. According to the research, there are specific feedback strategies and content characteristics that affect student learning and motivation.

TO LEARN MORE

Seven keys to effective feedback. Grant Wiggins (*Educational Leadership*, Vol. 70, Number 1, 2012).

<http://bit.ly/7Keys-Wiggins>

Six Tips for Managing the Feedback Workload. Andrew Miller. (*Edutopia*, July 3, 2019).

<http://bit.ly/6Tips-Miller>

Five Research Based Tips for Providing Students with Meaningful Feedback. Marianne Stenger. (*Edutopia*, August 4, 2014).

<http://bit.ly/5Tips-Stenger>

Feedback: Part of a System.

Dylan William. (*Feedback for Learning*, 2012. Vol. 70, No.1).

<http://bit.ly/Feedback-William>

Table 1: What does formative feedback look like?

Formative Feedback IS	Formative Feedback IS NOT
Specific to the learning target	Vague (e.g., “good”)
Process- or product-focused; identifies strengths and areas for growth	Learner-focused (You’re so smart!)
Targeted to the demands of the learning target	Diffuse and overwhelming (e.g. edits of even minute mistakes)
Focused on the quality of the students’ process/product/ideas as they are developing	Criterion-referenced (“Compared to the criteria, your response is good,”) or norm-referenced (e.g., “This is much better than the rest of the class”)
Timely; can be used to improve progress	Delayed until after the learning opportunity is over
Descriptive; specific, often in the form of questions	Evaluative—grades, scores, checkmarks, judgments
Actionable; concrete information that helps learners progress	Summative—no further learning on this learning target is expected

Also, feedback should be provided in a timely way so that students can take immediate action to improve their learning. Students also filter the feedback they receive and make meaning of the message through self-regulation, or the use and control of their thought processes. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to cultivate a classroom culture in which students view feedback as an integral part of the learning process.

Formative feedback is most effective when it:

- relates specifically to the learning target and success criteria.
 - focuses on strengths (what the student is doing well)
 - helps the student to be an investigator of learning and to identify errors
 - describes how to improve the work
 - changes feedback as student learning progresses and responds to where students currently are in relation to the learning target
- is provided at just the right time, in just the right amount.
- is positive, clear, and specific.
- is ongoing and consistent.
- makes actionable and manageable suggestions for improvement.
- helps students to become reflective learners.
- leads to opportunities for students to use the feedback to enhance their work.
- is supported by a classroom culture that values feedback.

Table 2: Examples of formative and evaluative of feedback

Descriptive or Formative Feedback	Evaluative Feedback
<p>Descriptive—specific, often in the form of questions</p> <p><i>“You provide a clear thesis statement for your essay. Do each of your three supporting paragraphs include evidence?”</i></p>	<p>Letter Grade: A through F</p>
<p>Timely—can be used to improve progress</p> <p>In a conference with the student the teacher says, <i>“I notice you are using the slide through the whole word strategy. Keep using this, and as you read also try looking for chunks.”</i></p>	<p>Comments such as:</p> <p><i>“Good job,” “nice work,” or “incorrect.”</i></p> <p><i>“Nice reading!”</i></p>
<p>Actionable—concrete information</p> <p><i>“The computation error (you wrote 100 x 15 =150) caused you to miss the correct answer to the word problem. Remember the strategy we practiced in class when multiplying numbers by 100. All other steps are correct.”</i></p>	<p>Number such as:</p> <p>24/25</p>

What is descriptive and evaluative feedback?

Evaluative feedback is relative either to a performance standard or to the performance of all students. Evaluative feedback is summative, providing general information or comments about how well or how poorly students performed on a task. It often takes the form of a letter grade; check mark; number; or comment such as “good,” “nice work,” or “incorrect.”

Descriptive or formative feedback, in contrast, provides specific information in written comments or conversations. Formative feedback helps students understand what they need to do to improve, helping learners understand where they are relative to the learning target and what they need to do next to close the gap.

In classroom instruction and assessment, there are different times and situations in which different types of feedback are most useful.

References

Brookhart, S. M. (2008). Feedback that fits. *Engaging the whole child: Reflections on best practices in learning, teaching, and leadership*, 166-175.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of educational research*, 77(1), 81-112.

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The Michigan Assessment Consortium’s Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI’s professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan’s professional educators.