

## *Original Paper*

# Enhancing Knowledge Quality through Formative Assessment and Teacher Talk

Eva Zore<sup>1</sup> & Mojca Mihelič<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English and Slovenian language, M. A., Danila Kumar Elementary School, Ljubljana, Slovenia and  
PhD candidate, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

<sup>2</sup> Maths and Physics and Headmistress, M. S., Danila Kumar Elementary School, Ljubljana, Slovenia

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper explores the integration of formative assessment with effective teacher communication to enhance student learning. It emphasizes the importance of personalized teaching, adapting methods to modern students' needs, and placing students at the center of the educational process. Formative assessment is highlighted as a continuous process that informs instruction and provides daily feedback, bridging the gap between current knowledge and learning goals. The paper also discusses differentiated teaching to address diverse student needs and argues for personalization in education. Effective classroom management and diverse teacher communication styles, including direct instruction, questioning, feedback, and encouragement, are emphasized as crucial for supporting student learning. The study contrasts national and international education programs, advocating for a combined approach that leverages both formative and summative assessments. The paper concludes by considering the impact of formative assessment on knowledge retention, interdisciplinary integration, and the application of knowledge across various domains, ultimately preparing students for future academic and real-world challenges.*

### ***Keywords***

*Classroom Management, Teacher Talk, Teacher Communication Styles, Flander's Analysis, Mother Tongue Learning, Formative Assessment, Personalized Teaching, Supportive Learning Environment*

## 1. Personalized Teaching and Classroom Management

Effective learning and teaching extend beyond traditional frontal instruction. Modern children are immersed in a technologically advanced world. Despite having excellent access to information, they often struggle to efficiently utilize, comprehend, connect, or enhance it. While it is commonly assumed that their multitasking abilities are well-developed, their attention spans often appear limited. This should be considered when planning lessons and managing the classroom.

The essence of quality teaching lies in a teacher who understands that the student, not a tool (e.g., a computer) or another person (e.g., the teacher), is at the center of the educational process. Effective classroom management involves motivating students to be active participants throughout the lesson. Lessons must be tailored to the student, not just in terms of individualization or differentiation, but enhanced into what education experts call personalization. Formative assessment plays a crucial role in this. Formative assessments are ongoing evaluations, observations, summaries, and reviews that inform teacher instruction and provide students with daily feedback (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Greenstein (2010) asserts that formative assessment emphasizes learning outcomes, makes goals transparent to students, provides clear assessment criteria, and especially closes the gap between what students know and what they aim to achieve.

In the context of formative assessment, it is not only the teacher who strives to achieve learning objectives. Students themselves must make sense of the content being taught and set personal goals within individual units, while the teacher guides this process and provides appropriate support. The teacher does not abandon their mentorship role but rather fulfills it by thoughtfully implementing various didactic strategies that significantly promote quality learning for all students. Effective classroom management and teaching strategies act reciprocally and are most effective when utilized thoughtfully. This paper, based on a presentation prepared for an expert meeting on formative assessment in February 2020, examines formative assessment as a process that includes clear intentions and success criteria, efficient student support, meaningful student feedback, student self-assessment, and peer collaboration.

## 2. Adapting Teaching Methods for Modern Education

The concept of differentiated teaching has become a staple in modern education. The inclusive nature of today's society is far from monotonous, and in its diversity, each student is treated as a unique individual. This means that differences such as familial, social, and economic factors, cultural background, gender, interests, etc., challenge the teacher to use didactic strategies that strengthen the student's skills and talents while encouraging progress in their weaker areas through various activities. It is an organizational measure that serves the function of individualization as a didactic principle. We talk about internal, external, and flexible differentiation of teaching (Strmčnik). While the curriculum sets out program-wide objectives at the school subject level, these objectives can be tailored at the institutional and individual levels. This is not the case when it comes to standards of knowledge and related grading. Fani Nolimal, in

her paper “Personalizacija vzgojno-izobraževalnega dela kot odgovor na izzive šolstva” (Personalization of Educational Work as an Answer to the Educational System’s Challenges), indicates that the teacher must suitably modify the learning environment (activities, learning dialogue), teaching content (materials, learning questions, teaching method/level of thinking, question types, interaction type, pace, presentation, and illustration type), and learning products/results (achievement/result types, deadline, evaluation type).

Specialist literature (Strmčnik) defines individualization of teaching as a didactic principle, which entails modifying the pace, teaching methods, and difficulty level of lessons in accordance with the needs of an individual student. Therefore, learning objectives and content vary with regard to the student’s ability, while at the same time, individualization allows students to progress through learning materials and techniques at a different pace according to their needs and abilities. This allows some students to focus on certain topics for longer, while others may skip them entirely. Therefore, individualization does not solely apply to learning differences on the group level but also on the individual level. The term differentiation of teaching may also denote a process characteristic or lesson adjustment, while individualization is considered more as a quality characteristic of the learning process. Both are based on the assumption that students between groups differ more or less in terms of how receptive they are to learning and how complex the content they learn is. There is also a tendency in internal differentiation and individualization to maintain naturally heterogeneous classes and sections (Blažič et al., 2003, p. 216).

This leads to personalization, which is not only an intersection but a union of the aforementioned mindsets. The latter ties to teaching, which is based on students’ needs and is tailored to their learning selection and specific interests. As a concept, personalization originates from a space that brings learning to the forefront, while lessons and teaching are understood as a “service” to learning; the student is responsible for their own learning, while the teacher more or less assists them. Of course, this means that learning objectives, content, methods, and pace may differ in a fully personalized environment. The essence of a personalized lesson is to tailor the educational system (lessons) to the student and not vice versa.

Pevec claims that personalization includes common objectives to ensure high quality of lessons: it allows for raising standards in a manner where teaching and learning are focused on the abilities and interests of students as well as on removing the obstacles to learning. As previously mentioned, the student is placed at the center of learning; this is done by including them in the planning of learning (they must be aware of the reasons for learning), encouraging their personal development (planning of education goals–self-realization, self-actualization, etc.), strengthening their development of learning abilities, connecting their creativity and social skills, as well as by linking the learning method with the needs of each individual student. This approach helps students build problem-solving skills, integrate knowledge with real-world issues, and, most importantly, boost their confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

### 3. Effective Formative Assessment and Teacher Talk

Effective formative assessment of a student, their learning process, and the acquisition of knowledge involves several key components:

- 1) **Determining Prior Knowledge and Clarifying Learning Intentions:** This includes planning personal learning objectives in relation to common objectives.
- 2) **Planning Didactic and Learning Strategies:** These strategies are essential for the successful and efficient achievement of learning objectives.
- 3) **Collecting Evidence:** Gathering evidence about achieving learning objectives is crucial.
- 4) **(Self)Evaluation:** This involves evaluating learning performance, the quality of students' knowledge, and consequently, the performance of the teacher's teaching.

Literature describes formative assessment as the “bridge between teaching and learning” and highlights five key strategies:

- 1) Clarifying, participating in defining, and understanding learning intentions and success criteria.
- 2) Engineering effective classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning.
- 3) Providing feedback to students.
- 4) Activating students as learning resources for one another.
- 5) Activating students as owners of their own learning.

The discrepancy between summative grading and formative assessment is significant. While related, they do not bear the same meaning. Formative evaluation assesses the entire learning process, at the end of which the student may be graded. Summative grading is part of the process; however, it is documented, and the potential final grade is the result of ongoing work. The student receives ongoing preparation and effective feedback on their knowledge acquisition progress. Simply put, a student cannot expect to achieve the highest grade if they did not meet objectives during the process, as set with the teacher or clarified by the teacher.

According to formative assessment expert Dylan Wiliam (2018), five core strategies are essential for successful formative assessment practice in the classroom:

- 1) Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success.
- 2) Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning.
- 3) Providing feedback that moves learning forward.
- 4) Activating learners as instructional resources for one another.
- 5) Activating learners as owners of their own learning.

The student's self-initiative or drive is also expressed in the formative assessment process. This drive is their ability to plan their progress in the learning process. The teacher's role is to sensibly lead and guide the student. A common mistake is the lack of trust in children's ideas, which limits their creativity, a

crucial part of the learning process. Formative assessment cannot replace grading, as it is a process, while grading is a final, summative state. Demonstration of knowledge is the final point in a narrow time frame, where the teacher leads the student to knowledge, directs them through information, and guides them on its application. Both teacher and student need to assess knowledge, determine progress, and check if learning objectives are clear on an ongoing basis.

Evaluation of knowledge, which also plays a selective role, is called normative evaluation by some experts (Brodnik, 2017). This evaluation focuses on the extent to which the student correctly memorizes learning content. Lower levels of knowledge are often evaluated, emphasizing content knowledge over process knowledge. The concept of formative evaluation is based on monitoring knowledge acquisition by students, aiming to improve learning and knowledge. Higher cognitive levels of knowledge require learning through understanding, which strengthens the permanence of acquired knowledge.

Formative assessment is in the hands of the teacher, who must be aware of its advantages. It is important that the pedagogical head provides autonomy to the teacher regarding formative assessment, cautions and guides them through the process, and provides objective criticism. The headmaster/headmistress can lead the teacher by asking questions such as: Are the learning intentions and success criteria clear? When is it important for the teacher to be heard during a lesson? What are the learning foundations and lesson objectives for the teacher? Is the teacher capable of leading the child using efficient questions, or are they condescending? Is the teacher guiding the student actively? Is the teacher looking for an answer, or is the student only listening and repeating?

Teacher Talk plays a crucial role in this dynamic, involving the teacher's ability to communicate effectively, provide clear instructions, and engage students in meaningful dialogue. By focusing on Teacher Talk, educators can ensure that their interactions with students are purposeful and supportive, ultimately enhancing the learning experience.

#### **4. A Process of Communication in Classroom**

There is a constant interaction between teachers and students in the classroom, as the learning process is primarily a process of communication (Han & Tosten, 2016). The field of classroom communication has already been studied in the past. In Slovenia, classroom communication was studied by O. Kunst Gnamuš (1992), who states that "classroom communication explores the forms of verbal activity in teaching, their cognitive structure and social assumptions, and based on this, infers educational effects" (Kunst Gnamuš, 1992, p. 7); Brajša (1993), who divides communication into intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious, planned or unplanned; B. Marentič Požarnik (2000); and M. Ule (2005), who states that communication encompasses processes between people and within the individual. Foreign authors describe it similarly, for example, J. Wood (2004), who defines communication as a systemic process in which actors influence each other by transmitting symbols.

To ensure communication is as effective as possible, it is important to focus on the teacher's speech in the classroom. This speech must be based on the conversion of expert content into a pedagogical communication relationship, which consists of social and cognitive functions. In other words, the teacher's speech in the classroom is twofold, consisting of relational and cognitive speech (Kunst Gnamuš, 1989; Ule, 2005). Relational speech is used by the teacher to establish contact with students, form and maintain mutual relationships, and create conditions for guiding and directing the student's process (Vogel, 2008; Vogel, 2009). It synchronizes the flow of consciousness, achieves the exchange of ideas, agreement on their reality, correctness, or acceptability, and induces the desired student activity (teaching as guided conversation). At the same time, it connects the participants in the conversation, their sensory, cognitive, and verbal activities, creating closeness or distance, equal or unequal relationships, competitiveness or collaboration (Kunst Gnamuš, 1992). Cognitive speech, on the other hand, is the speech of the profession or science, through which students acquire new knowledge (Vogel, 2008). It includes justifying, proving, explaining, and discussing, and is characterized by the use of metalanguage. It refers to that part of pedagogical speech that relates to the subject matter (Kunst Gnamuš, 1992). Inappropriate teacher speech can create barriers in the student's perception and understanding of the content. Martin (2021) also emphasizes the importance of teacher communication in the classroom. Misalignment can have several consequences, including the creation of a communication wall between teachers and students, alienation, and poorer academic performance in the classroom. In the 1970s, experts began intensively researching verbal communication in the classroom. Based on these studies, several instruments were developed to observe it (Reciprocal Category System, 1968; Equivalent Talk Categories, 1970; Verbal Interaction Category System, and Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories System (FIAS), 1970; Student/Teacher Interaction Classroom Observation, 2016). FIAS is one of the most well-known observation instruments for classroom interaction. Flanders (1970) classified classroom interaction into 10 categories. Using his instrument, the teacher's speech (referred to as "teacher talk") is observed in seven defined categories (four of these define indirect teacher speech, such as praise and questioning, while the other three define direct teacher speech, such as lecturing and giving instructions); student speech (referred to as "pupil talk") is observed in two defined categories (e.g., student responses to teacher questions), and silence (or confusion) is defined in the tenth category. The focus of the research will be on teacher speech, which can be divided into direct and indirect speech.

## **5. Integrating Formative Assessment with Effective Teacher Communication**

The approach used in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program cannot be directly applied to the national elementary school education program, as formative assessment and evaluation are integral to the IB system, where the final grade is derived from various partial grades. According to the first paragraph of Article 3 of the Rules on Knowledge Assessment and Grading and Students' Progress to a Higher Class Standing in Elementary Schools (2013), the national elementary school education program does

not allow teachers to grade knowledge assessments in a way that directly impacts the final grade. Such assessments are only meant to gather information on how the student is meeting the objectives or standards set in the curriculum. Knowledge assessment is therefore mandated, but grading it is prohibited. Through these assessments, we can determine that the student has made good progress, but we cannot consider this when assigning their final grade. The final grade is merely a snapshot in time and excludes partial evaluations, which provide practical and useful feedback to the child and their parents.

We should consider whether formative assessment and summative grading are opposing concepts or complementary mindsets. The current situation in the national education program differs from that in the international education program. Formative assessment is the supportive path that helps the student reach their goal, while the grade is the summit (summative). The main issue with the national education program is that the Rules do not allow formative assessment of the student's progress to be considered, preventing the teacher from providing additional motivation during the learning process. This seems to contradict the goals of elementary education. The problem with such grading is that it only captures a moment in time and does not reflect actual knowledge. Thus, the student receives the incorrect message that only the result matters for a good grade, not the learning journey. This devalues knowledge. The student learns that only the knowledge demonstrated at a specific moment (the day of an oral or written exam) counts, not their overall progress.

For example, a student's knowledge was assessed as good (grade 3 or UK grade equivalent C) on a written assessment at the end of the year, but this cannot be considered in the final grade. One week later, just before the end of the school year, the same student's knowledge was graded insufficient (grade 1 or UK grade equivalent F) on an oral exam. The lack of time prevents the teacher from reassessing the student, so a negative grade from the oral exam may lead to a lower final grade, even though the teacher knows the student had an off day. Is it appropriate for the teacher to break the rules (and help the student avoid a remedial exam) by considering the positive grade from the written assessment, knowing it reflects the student's true knowledge?

The ideal solution would be to combine partial grades (formative assessment) from the international education program with the snapshot grading (summative) from the national education program. Teacher communication styles are crucial in this process, as they influence how effectively teachers can convey expectations, provide feedback, and support students in their learning journey.

The quality of the relationship between teachers and students is an important factor in students' cognitive and non-cognitive processes and influences their outcomes (Cornelius White, 2007). Education and upbringing are closely connected and depend on the quality of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Bratanić, 1991). Interpersonal communication between the teacher and the student is a fundamental condition for establishing these relationships and for effective learning and teaching (Wubbels et al., 1993). In the field of education, the relationship is a process that is established between the teacher and the individual student or the entire class (Bratanić, 1991). It is an interpersonal

relationship in which the student and teacher give and receive knowledge, experience, willingness to work, and cooperate. Positive mutual relationships in the classroom also have a positive impact on the teacher's relationship with students, classroom behavior, and the overall atmosphere (Schutz & Lee, 2014; Spilt, 2011). The teacher-student relationship is one of the most important factors in teaching as it directly affects the climate and work in the classroom (Doyle, 1986). Classroom climate is expressed through mutual relationships, while mutual relationships also reflect the classroom climate (Marn, 2006; Pšunder, 1998). Studies examining teachers' and students' perceptions of classroom climate have proven that a positive climate has a positive effect on students' cognitive perceptions (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 1998; Wubbels et al., 2006). Research has shown that students' perception of the teacher-student relationship is strongly related to their academic success (den Brok et al., 2004; Wubbels et al., 2006; Brekelmans et al., 2005) and that a healthy mutual relationship in the classroom is a crucial prerequisite for students' involvement in learning activities (Brekelmans et al., 2000). C. Razdevšek-Pučko (1990) in the conclusions of her doctoral dissertation also notes that students' ability to actively participate in the classroom positively affects their relationship with school and academic performance. Improving the quality of teacher-student relationships is associated with a reduction in behavioral problems in primary schools (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011).

The teacher uses various levers and instruments in leadership to shape a comprehensive, distinctive leadership style (Kovač et al., 2004). The author defines leadership as a process in which the teacher, based on their unique abilities, personality traits, and knowledge, influences people through characteristic behavior in order to mutually achieve agreed-upon goals (Kovač et al., 2004). Strock (2006, in Peklaj & Pečjak, 2015) defines classroom leadership as the teacher's use of various strategies to ensure an effective and positive learning environment for students, free from behavioral problems. However, authors define leadership styles in different ways. Flanders (1972) distinguishes between a directive and an indirect leadership style (based on the teacher's direct and indirect speech). A teacher with a directive leadership style offers criticism, comments, and gives instructions, thereby directing students' activities. An indirect leadership style is demonstrated by a teacher who accepts students' emotions, considers suggestions, and provides positive feedback. The division into authoritarian, democratic, and anarchic leadership styles emerged from Lewin et al.'s (1939) research. M. Pšunder (1998) cites the authoritative or directive style and the democratic or participatory style, while D. Baumrind (1991) adds the permissive style to the authoritarian and authoritative styles.

Examples of Teacher Communication Styles:

- 1) Direct Instruction:** Clearly articulate concepts and expectations to students, ensuring they grasp the objectives and success criteria.
- 2) Questioning:** Employ open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking and encourage active student participation.
- 3) Feedback:** Provide constructive feedback to help students recognize their strengths and



identify areas for improvement.

**4) Encouragement:** Motivate students by acknowledging their efforts and progress, fostering a supportive learning environment.

**5) Active Listening:** Show genuine interest in students' ideas and concerns, making them feel valued and understood.

**6) Scaffolding:** Offer support and guidance as students tackle challenging tasks, gradually reducing assistance as they become more proficient.

**7) Collaborative Dialogue:** Engage students in discussions that promote peer learning and collective problem-solving.

**8) Non-Verbal Communication:** Use body language, facial expressions, and gestures to reinforce messages and maintain student engagement.

Tyler (1993) connects four leadership goals (directive, supportive, instructional, and delegative) within a situational theory, stating that different leadership styles can be applied in various groups and situations. Wubbels' theory of classroom leadership styles is also important. Wubbels et al. (1993) developed a model that describes the communication between teachers and students based on communication styles. M. Skarbø and K. Skovholt (2019) assert that every teacher demonstrates a unique communication style during classroom interaction. Research results related to teachers' communication styles have shown that communication styles affect relationships in the classroom, the quality of teaching, and effective classroom leadership (Brekelmans et al., 2005). Based on this model, Brekelmans et al. (1993) defined eight communication styles (directive, authoritative, tolerant and authoritative, tolerant, uncertain and tolerant, uncertain and aggressive, repressive, difficult).

By employing these diverse communication styles, teachers can create a more dynamic and supportive learning environment.

### *5.1 Empowering Learning with Teacher Talk*

A crucial aspect of a child's quality learning experience is receiving feedback, which includes all information given to the student about their work with the aim of enhancing their learning and knowledge. Feedback should always be provided using the "sandwich" method; it should not include judgments, but concrete positive observations, concrete negative observations, negative impact, wishes and recommendations, and positive changes. It must be described to the student what specifically they did, what they should change, and what positive changes will happen if they follow the suggestions (Brodnik, 2017). A child can also receive feedback from a peer, known as "critical friendship," which provides insight into the quality of their learning and knowledge. It is not always suitable for the teacher to be dominant when providing feedback. This is important not only for building knowledge but also for developing social skills, peer cooperation, and evaluation. Evaluation gives the student insight into the level at which they are achieving learning objectives and enables them to plan further improvements to

their learning, while it also allows the teacher to reflect on effective and useful support they provide to students on the path to quality learning.

Teacher Talk plays a significant role in this process, as it involves the teacher's ability to communicate effectively, provide clear instructions, and engage students in meaningful dialogue. By focusing on Teacher Talk and feedback, educators can ensure that their interactions with students are purposeful and supportive, ultimately enhancing the learning experience.

### *5.2 Laying the Groundwork: How Formative Assessment Builds Student Success*

Formative assessment is like laying the foundation for a house. Just as a strong foundation is crucial for the stability and longevity of a house, formative assessment is essential for the solid development of a student's learning journey. Here's how they compare:

#### **1) Planning and Preparation:**

- **House Foundation:** Before construction begins, detailed plans are drawn up, and the ground is prepared. This involves surveying the land, clearing debris, and ensuring the soil is stable.
- **Formative Assessment:** Similarly, formative assessment starts with understanding the student's prior knowledge and learning needs. Teachers plan lessons that build on this foundation, setting clear learning objectives.

#### **2) Continuous Monitoring:**

- **House Foundation:** During the construction of the foundation, builders continuously check the alignment, depth, and materials used to ensure everything is up to standard.
- **Formative Assessment:** In the classroom, teachers continuously monitor students' progress through various assessments, observations, and feedback. This helps identify areas where students may need additional support or adjustments in instruction.

#### **3) Adjustments and Corrections:**

- **House Foundation:** If any issues are detected during the foundation work, immediate corrections are made to prevent future problems. This might involve reinforcing certain areas or adjusting the layout.
- **Formative Assessment:** When teachers notice gaps in understanding or skills, they provide timely and specific feedback to help students improve. This might involve reteaching concepts, offering additional practice, or using different instructional strategies.

#### **4) Building on a Strong Base:**

- **House Foundation:** A well-laid foundation supports the entire structure of the house, ensuring it can withstand various stresses and remain stable over time.
- **Formative Assessment:** A strong formative assessment process supports students' ongoing learning, helping them build a solid understanding of concepts and skills. This foundation enables them to tackle more complex tasks and achieve long-term academic success.

## 5) Feedback and Reflection:

- **House Foundation:** Builders reflect on the foundation work to ensure it meets all standards and will support the house effectively.
- **Formative Assessment:** Teachers and students reflect on the learning process, using feedback to guide future learning and teaching. This reflection helps both parties understand what works well and what needs improvement.

In both cases, the goal is to create a strong, reliable base that supports future growth and development. Just as a house cannot stand without a solid foundation, students' learning cannot thrive without ongoing, formative assessment to guide and support their progress.

## 6. Resolution

In devising strategies to achieve learning objectives or meet knowledge standards, both the student and the teacher must consider the learning goal and the path the student will take to reach it. This journey is influenced by the student's prior knowledge, motivation, current progress towards the learning objective, and the methods employed to achieve this goal. The teacher acts as a mentor, guiding the learning process.

Formative assessment clearly enhances both the student's learning strategies and the teacher's instructional methods. It improves the quality of knowledge, increases student engagement in the learning process, and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. Effective classroom management is also crucial, as it creates an environment where formative assessment can thrive.

It is essential to consider how formative assessment impacts the retention of knowledge, interdisciplinary integration, and the application of knowledge across various domains. By fostering a supportive and dynamic learning environment, formative assessment not only helps students achieve their goals but also prepares them for future academic and real-world challenges.

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