

Formative Assessment: An Experience in Foreign Language Teacher Education

La evaluación formativa: una experiencia en la formación de profesores de lengua extranjera

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Resumen

La evaluación formativa desempeña un importante rol pedagógico en la educación contemporánea pues fortalece el aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante, mejora la calidad del proceso educativo y como resultado el crecimiento personal. En este artículo científico se socializa una experiencia alternativa para la implementación de acciones de evaluación formativa y sus resultados en la formación de profesores de lengua extranjera. La metodología de trabajo investigativo se basó en la investigación-acción e incluyó la exploración y estudio bibliográfico del estado del arte en los ámbitos nacional e internacional. La estrategia de evaluación formativa se implementó en un grupo del tercer año de la carrera de Formación de Profesores de Lengua Extranjera; y en particular a través de la disciplina principal integradora Didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras. Los resultados de esencia destacan la función que desempeñan aspectos como la necesaria interacción educador-estudiante, el papel activo y compartido del estudiante, la reflexión a través de

Palabras clave: evaluación formativa; formación de profesores; lengua extranjera

Abstract

Formative assessment plays an important pedagogical role in contemporary education since it enhances student-centered learning, improves the quality of teaching and learning, and promotes personality growth. This paper socializes an alternative experience in implementing formative assessment actions and its outcomes in foreign language teacher education. The methodology was based on action research and included the exploration of the state of the art in the national and international contexts. The formative assessment strategy was implemented in the third-year group of the Foreign Language Teacher Education Major; specifically, through a system of lessons in the core discipline Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching. The theoretical and methodological findings highlight the function of the educator and student interaction, students' involvement, reflection, assessment of conversations which use effective questions, feedback, self and peer assessment, and the collection of evidence for improving the process. The

Keywords: formative assessment; teacher education; foreign language



Introduction

In higher education, the evaluation process has a special relevance in learning because of its regulating, affective and cognitive functions. The terms evaluation or assessment are often used to refer to the academic achievements of the students, and this implies being judged in learning, collecting data and criteria that help issue result judgments. However, the assessment act encloses a more complex function.

Cuban university education has established the norms on assessment in order to achieve more efficient and high-quality teaching and learning results. The Resolution (47/2022) on teaching and methodological work in higher education was updated to meet the exigencies of the present curriculum; it demands more personalized, student-centered assessment acts, so that they participate in decision-making and assume more responsibility in the learning process. This becomes a challenge for teachers as they have to reorganize their methodological philosophies if they want to achieve the desired results.

Based on the continuous diagnosis of the different disciplines in the Bachelor in Education English Language Major, some insufficiencies were delimited. The observation of different types of lessons, the interview and interaction with teachers determined the need for transformations in the assessment strategies. The limitations comprise the following: cognitive aspects are prioritized disregarding the affective and the comprehensive formative character; the assessment tools and techniques do not always focus problem-based situations related to the students' profession; the students perceive the assessment act as a way to know whether they have succeeded or failed, and not as a practice that regulates their learning to learn skills; comprehensive learning tasks are not systematically used in the formative assessment process; the students have little or no participation in decision-making with regards to types of techniques and indicators.

In fact, it can be obviously expressed that there are insufficiencies in the conception of techniques and procedures to approach formative assessment; the pedagogical practice does not systematically conceive the methodological aspects that favor reflection, feedback, self-assessment and self-regulation; the lack of actions to implement these processes will consequently limit the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process.

Explorations of the national and international literature on formative and summative assessments have concluded that there is plenty of theoretical-methodological support on the issue; however, the same cannot be said about practical alternatives to deal with it. Hence, the objective of the article is to contribute with a practical strategy in assessing the students and contribute to the formative character of learning. Nonetheless, this paper provides essential and recent theoretical and methodological findings, so as to support the proposed formative assessment procedures and their implementation in the teaching-learning practice.



Methodology

The combination of empirical and theoretical methods helped determine the insufficiencies in practice and the theoretical findings of research in the national and international grounds. The researchers made observations of the assessment process and applied an interview to educators in different disciplines of the English Language Teacher Education Major at the University of Holguín; especially in lectures, seminars and workshops of theoretical and practical disciplines such as Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching, Linguistic Studies and History of the English Speaking Cultures.

The theoretical study included the revision of the assessment norms in higher education, such as the 47/2022 Resolution which comprises all indications for the teaching-learning process and the methodological work of university educators. All these norms and indications are scientifically supported by research results in the national and international educational contexts.

Through the use of theoretical methods such as analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction and abstract to concrete, the authors of this study determined the essential theoretical propositions from different sources in order to substantiate the practical contribution; it consists in an alternative strategy to implement the formative assessment process throughout a system of lessons in a given discipline.

Action research favored the verification of the expected results through implementation in the system of lessons of the chosen discipline and subject syllabus. The suggested techniques and procedures involved the appropriate ones for the lecture, the seminar and the workshops in Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching II, a subject in the third academic year of the Major. This was the sample group for the practical implementation of the designed techniques and procedures.

Results and discussion

Formative assessment is an essential component of formative learning, the latter defined as "A personalized and conscious process of appropriation of the historical and social experience which occurs in cooperation between the teacher and the group (...) a process in which the learners, being responsible of this process and its result, transforms the objective reality and themselves as well. (Bermúdez & Pérez, 2004, p. 52).



In their definition, the authors point out that formative learning is a process in which the subject's transformation goes from an initial state to another qualitatively superior one. The function of formative assessment is vital in promoting and regulating this type of learning. In addition to this, the relevance of personality growth is stressed as a crucial goal supported by the humanistic dimension of education.

Formative assessment is also characterized as a planned, ongoing process used by students and teachers during learning and teaching in order to elicit and use evidence of student learning, to improve understanding. It is added that this process supports students to become self-directed learners. (Beard, 2023). Gathered data offer useful information to the teacher to identify the gap and collect reliable and valid evidence of learner's knowledge, skills and progress (Almache et al, 2020). Despite educators' awareness with the conception of formative assessment and its aims, in pedagogical practice very few implement actions to develop this process (Barboza-Acuña & Cherres, 2021).

The study of the evaluation norms indicated by the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education System (MES in Spanish) through the latest Resolution 47/2022, and the study of scientific literature, favored the identification of relevant theoretical and methodological elements which sustain techniques, procedures, attitudes and actions teachers and students must follow so as to achieve formative assessment and efficient learning. The methodological norms refer to the assessment of not only knowledge and skills, but also students' attitudes, behaviors and feelings.

Pedagogical tenets put emphasis on the need to develop self-learning strategies in the students, to enable scaffolding through systematic mediation and feedback, to provide meta-cognitive orientations, and to offer opportunities for reflection on learning and on values education. This teaching practice will lead to self-regulation of learning and to the formation of a self-determined personality (Labarrere, 2001; Addine, 2004; Bermúdez-Morris, 2004; and Pérez et al, 2017).

From the analysis, one may paraphrase that learning is a dynamic and controversial process in which the subject progressively advances through different stages to reach distinct levels of autonomy. Therefore, formative assessment procedures play a predominant role in creating study habits and skills, and in the development of meta-cognitive strategies that help shape the student's personality.



Other authors worldwide underline certain characteristics of formative assessment: the shared assessment nature since both educator and student engage in an interaction and negotiation process (López-Pastor & Molinos, 2009). They state that its goal is to monitor student learning and to provide ongoing feedback that can be used to improve teaching and by students to improve their learning, and also that it helps identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need work (Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation, Carnegie University, Pittsburg, Pensilvania, USA).

The use of teaching strategies that promote interaction and collaboration such as teaching by projects, peer teaching, student-centered learning help educators collect data and analyze evidence to make decisions in the implementation of actions to favor learning. In this sense, formative assessment is a challenge for teachers as it demands "Good mastery of pedagogical abilities to retain students' ideas, to identify recurring difficulties and to have a wide repertoire of teaching strategies. (Talanquer, 2015, p. 177).

A methodological alternative strategy for implementing formative assessment

In order to achieve formative assessment, the authors departed from planning the methodological alternative. A theme from one of the disciplines (Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching) was selected. Then, the analysis of the general goals of the curriculum to break them down into more detailed and measurable targets (specific objectives in the syllabus and unit content) was carried out. Later, it was necessary to identify the professional problem-based situations related to the particular theme to be treated in the system of lessons.

"Formative assessment should aim at diagnosing strengths and weaknesses in the framework of competences." (Bizarro et al, 2019, pp. 374-390). Therefore, the methodological and communicative competences of the foreign language teacher are the focus of attention in this process. But within them some specific competencies that attach to the particular topic, activities and context are identified; a distinction between competence and competency has been assumed: the former viewed, from a discipline perspective, as broad general capacities, and the latter as narrower elements that are related to a specific performance, task or activity (Hyland, 1994; Vitello, 2021).

The following chart presents the identified general goal of the discipline and the broken-down specific objectives of the syllabus and unit of lessons. This obviously helped coherently determine the specific problem-based teaching situations the students would have to cope with at the end of the system of lessons, so as to relate them to the development of professional competences.



Competence to achieve at the end of the Discipline (Methodology of FLT)	Competence to achieve at the end of the Subject (Methodology of FLT II)	Competency to achieve at the end of the system of lessons/ theme / unit in the subject syllabus
To plan different types of lessons and system of lessons integrating instruction and education based on the comprehensive diagnosis of the students.	To plan presentation lessons for the management of the English teaching learning process in junior high school at an applicative level integrating instruction and education.	To apply the knowledge, abilities, attitudes and motivation in planning a system of procedures of a presentation technique for a junior high school.

The relevance of this analysis relies on the mastery educators should have of the discipline and subject syllabuses in order to make the students conscious of the expected short-term and long-term goals and outcomes; and to get them well-oriented on the process they must undergo from the whole to the parts and vice versa. This awareness enables them to self-assess on the parts and gets them better prepared for the summative assessment and grades at the end-of-the-course tasks.

Considering the specific competency and the professional problem-based situations, the planning and organization of the formative assessment techniques and procedures were conceived. Its organization obeys to the logical sequence of the teaching-learning process in this particular discipline, so that permanent self-learning abilities are enhanced.

The experience was implemented in the third academic year group of the major. At this stage, the students are expected to model English teaching tasks and lessons for junior high school students applying their comprehensive pedagogical, methodological and communicative preparation. Based on the theoretical referents and practical experiences, they have to support their pedagogical decisions and the treatment of professional problem-based situations, evidencing appropriate communicative competence in the English language.

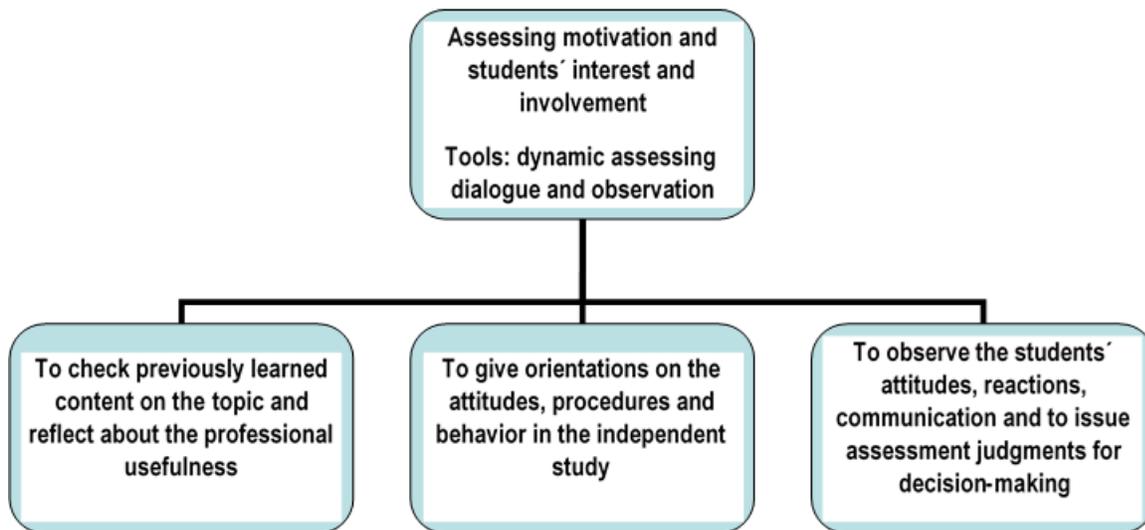
The selected theme was the teaching-learning process of vocabulary items for which different types of lessons were designed (lecture, seminar and workshops). The system of lessons was conceived in such a way that formative assessment would coherently fit and accomplish its role.



Formative assessment strategy in the lecture

In the lecture, the essential content was treated and oriented for extra-class independent study; this content included linguistic, psycholinguistic and methodological aspects. The assessment in the lecture was centered first on affective aspects, such as motivation, in order to get the students involved and to make them comprehend the different aspects of the lesson topic. The starting point was the exploration of the students' previous knowledge through an assessing dialogue (to check their mental schemas), to reflect on the professional relevance of the topic for the pedagogical practice, and to assess their communicative abilities to express ideas; "formative assessment involves a cyclical process to make the students' thinking observable and to make inferences about their comprehension process" (Talanquer, 2015, p. 177).

The assessment conversation also served the purpose of influencing the interests and attitudes to follow in the self-study process. Consequently, the assessment procedures prioritized observation of the students' behaviors, interest, and comprehension of the professional usefulness of the content; this assessment process does not necessarily imply giving grades that may discourage the students, but rather to collect evidence for decision-making and improving teaching and learning. (See graphic synthesis No1)



Graphic synthesis No. 1: Formative assessment strategy in the lecture

Formative assessment strategy in the seminar

In the seminar, the students read and enriched their knowledge anchoring the previously oriented concepts and information in their mental schemas; in this case, they had to analyze how different authors approached the teaching and learning of vocabulary items from the linguistic and methodological points of view. During the seminar orientation (First assessment

moment), study skills and strategies were socialized, for example: how to combine different types of study readings (previewing, skim-reading, scanning, intensive reading of selected parts of the text), how to take down notes (key words and phrases, abbreviations, paraphrasing, drawing concept maps to represent the understanding of the topic, and summarizing essential ideas.). In fact, study skills are oriented, socialized and discussed.

A second assessment moment took place after concluding the seminar; a reflection session was conducted by the educator through a conversation (using questions) to reveal evidence. "The assessment becomes formative to the extent that evidence about the students' performance is sought, interpreted and used by educators and students to make decisions on the next steps to follow and to feedback the teaching-learning process. (Bizarro et al, 2019, p. 377; citing Black & Williams (1998), Brookheart (2009) and Martínez (2012)).

The main concern of this assessment interaction was to socialize learning strategies among the students and to make them reflect and self-assess their performance through a questionnaire on the following parameters:

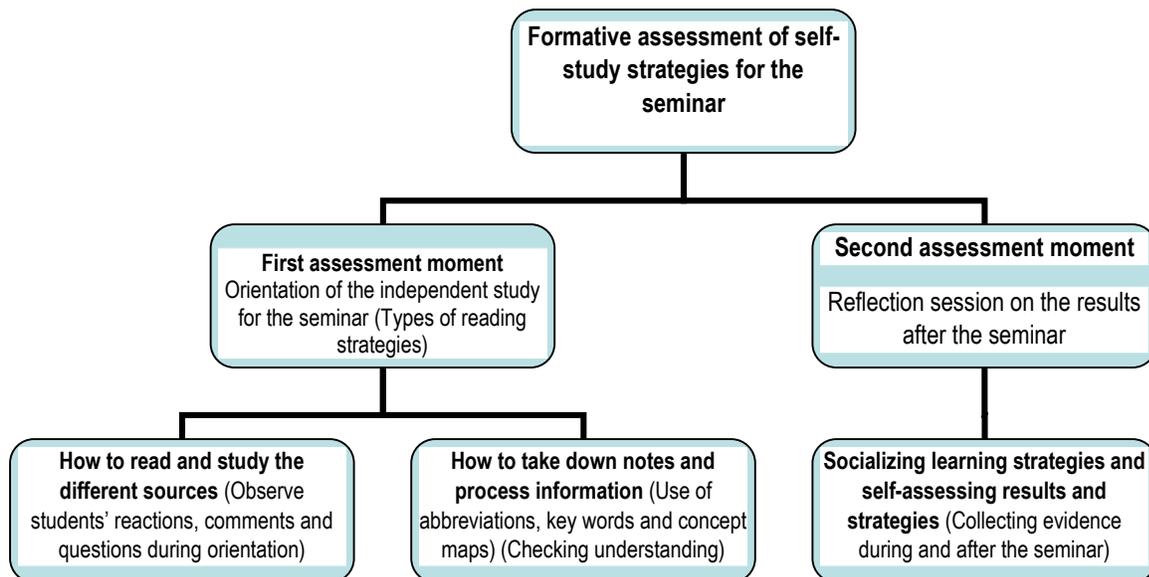
- The problems they faced and the solutions they found while reading and exploring the different sources.
- How they combined the different types of reading during the self-study session and the efficient use of time.
- The strategies they used for note-taking so as to be able to synthesize the essential information and ideas through concept maps and summaries.
- Their own judgment on the usefulness of the procedures they employed.
- The complexities they faced to translate into English information from sources in Spanish and to elaborate answers to questions.
- Their level of satisfaction with the information they could find and what to do next time.
- How they self-assess in their position as language teachers in preparation to support the methodological foundation of a presentation lesson to teach vocabulary items, which they will face in their practicum period.
- How they self-assess their preparation for the seminar and what aspects they consider should be improved.



Sample questions used by the educator to guide the assessing conversation and reflection:

1. What problems did you have while dealing with the bibliography?
2. Did you read fast the different sources trying to locate the essential aspects? Did you read and analyze these aspects carefully? Did you jot down key words and expressions to summarize the essential aspects? Did you draw any concept map? Do these procedures help you retain and retrieve the information?
3. Was this complex to translate information into English from the sources that are in Spanish? What difficulties did you have?
4. Are you satisfied with the information you found? What else do you think you need to do?
5. How do you feel about teaching vocabulary in primary or secondary school educations?
6. How do you self-assess on this topic? What do you need to improve?

(See graphic synthesis No. 2)



Graphic synthesis 2: Formative assessment strategy in the seminar

Formative assessment strategy in the workshops

In the first workshop, the students integrated and consolidated knowledge, reached generalizations about the methodological conception of vocabulary teaching and developed communicative skills, especially through presenting, arguing, and discussing their didactic decisions on problem-solving situations. Cooperative learning was promoted through group work, and the learning tasks were analyzed from an interdisciplinary approach. This required the students' interaction to exchange ideas, discuss and make decisions; through the process, collaboration, peer teaching, mediation and feedback were encouraged. Feedback is not only provided by the educator, but by more advanced peers.

The problem-solving situations about vocabulary teaching elicited decisions on: selecting and grouping lexical items for teaching purposes, portioning and organizing lexical content for different lessons, elaboration of contextualized communicative situations for teaching the target content, analysis of appropriate alternative techniques, procedures and activities. The formative assessment act focused on the process (Group interaction and preparation) and on the outcome (Presenting and socializing the decisions and solutions to the problem-solving situations by representatives of each group).

During all the work session, the educator registered the evidence of strengths and weakness to improve the teaching-learning process. Cognitive and meta-cognitive feedback was provided with the involvement and participation of the students, who contributed to enrich the process through self-assessment and peer-assessment.

In the second workshop, a more comprehensive task was developed: the planning, presentation, analysis and discussion of lessons. The students performed the learning task, analyzed and shared experiences, and developed communication skills in the foreign language in order to reflect about what they had done, to self-assess and to regulate the learning process.

The orientations on the extra-class independent study played a very important role; the students needed to be situated in the logical sequence of the foreign language teaching-learning process so as to comprehend the task to accomplish. Their present level of cognitive development, communicative skills and pedagogical knowledge were taken into account in order to devise the pedagogical problem-based task selected. A preparation study guide was assigned, the assessment indicators were discussed in the group and the students gave opinions, agreed or disagreed before reaching a consensus.



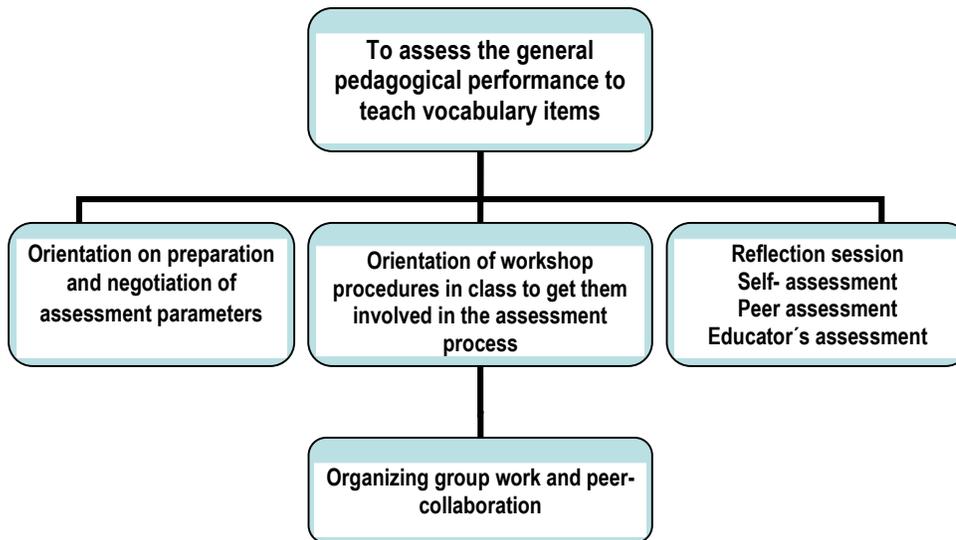
The negotiated assessment parameters comprised: 1) Effective comprehensible communication in the foreign language (B1 level according to the CEFRL), 2) Appropriate design and use of teaching media and employment of information and computing techniques, 3) Pedagogical and linguistic creativity, 4) Methodological support to describe, explain and elaborate on the selected techniques and procedures and their effectiveness from a communicative perspective, and 5) Treatment to values education during the lesson and to developmental learning.

The formative assessment sequence of the workshop included the following moments: the students, previously oriented, analyzed their peers' presentations guided by the negotiated assessment parameters; the educator and the rest of the students addressed questions, and offered reinforcement comments and tips to improve teaching skills. Finally, the educator guided the general assessment encouraging self-assessment and critical reflection. To ensure reflection and self-assessment, the educator prepared the following questionnaire to judge responsibility, study skills, strengths and weaknesses, learning strategies and responsibility for their professional performance. (See graphic synthesis No. 3).

Questionnaire used by the educator

1. What problems did you have while getting ready for this workshop, particularly in planning the activity?
2. Are you satisfied with what you have done? What else do you think you can do? What else do you need?
3. How do you feel about teaching vocabulary in primary or secondary school educations?
4. Did you devote enough time in studying? Are you motivated to go on?
5. Are you capable of orienting, implementing and controlling vocabulary presentation activities or not?
6. How do you assess your communication abilities to accomplish this?
7. How do you self-assess in general? What do you need to improve?





Graphic synthesis No. 3: Formative assessment strategy in the second workshop

Conclusions

The strategy proposed to foster formative assessment to favor more efficient learning outcomes is an alternative that can be adjusted and adapted to different university major contexts and curriculum conditions. A coherent design of assessment procedures was achieved throughout the system of lessons that allowed a transition to more complex assessment tasks and the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and capacities from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The assessment process was centered on professional problem-based teaching situations, considering the pedagogical, methodological and communicative specific competencies of the foreign language teacher in preparation. Through this experience, the systemic and coherent character of formative assessment is manifested; the assessment procedures at the initial stage prepare the students and paved the way to more comprehensive teaching tasks at the end of the system of lessons and course (Summative Assessment).

Throughout the transition process, the shared character of assessment was observed (students and educator involvement and interaction). It is materialized in the negotiation of parameters, in the comprehension and discussion of assessment tasks, in collecting evidence and guided reflection to give feedback and through self-assessment and peer assessment. This dynamic character and involvement gives the teaching-learning process its formative character as the students self-assess their attitudes, behavior, responsibility, study skills and results. All the aforementioned elements have contributed to important transformations in the students in this process, and especially personality growth.

The results obtained in the comprehensive formation of the students' personality derive from reflection and feedback on learning and on attitudes and values education. The system of formative actions had an impact enhancing responsibility, laboriousness, cooperation, positive peer criticism, self-criticism, and self-assessment; this helped redirect their attitudes and learning strategies in order to grow as social and psychological beings.

The impact of formative assessment largely depends on the ability of educators to formulate reflection questions and guide the assessing conversations. It should be a continuous, qualitative and comprehensive process based mainly on teaching problem-based situations linked to the students' future professional performance, particularly on pedagogical skills, values and competences.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Author Contribution

Pedro Antonio Machín Armas (principal author): Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing- Original draft preparation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

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