

## Exploring the role of feedback in the context of pre-university didactic communication

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### Abstract

Didactic communication, as a convergent instrumental and a specific form of educational communication, involves a process of generating sustainable and integrated behaviors of pupils. From the perspective of formal education, within the institutionalized framework of the school and between partners with certain status-roles: teacher-pupils, didactic communication forms the basis of the process of teaching-assimilating knowledge. The educational context, the code used (verbal, nonverbal, paraverbal or written), the type and quality of communicative teacher – pupils' relationship and the feedback component highly influence the achievement of cognitive, affective and attitudinal pupils' changes within the didactic communication. In an educational system predisposed to continuous transformations and adjustments, the role exercised by feedback as the educational method with the highest impact and highest scalability, justifies the construction of a methodology of giving feedback in the didactic communication. Based on data from 50 opinion polls and administrative data, using correlation analysis specific to small samples, we show the relation between different types of feedback provided by the teacher and their effectiveness in terms of promoting student learning and the way feedback can be used to enhance classroom learning and teaching in pre-university didactic communication in Romania.

**Key words:** assessment, didactic communication, formal education, feedback, learning

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## **1. Introduction**

Besides the differences resulted from the multiple attempts to systematize the functions and efficiency of communication, there are some shared points of view in the diverse field of communication forms, which associate didactic communication with a process of transmitting knowledge, of training skills and attitudes, and of acquiring scientific and cultural values with a view to educating the young generation, in an organized way in education institutions, by people with a certain professional background.

L. Iacob (1998, p. 190) defines didactic communication as “an instrumental communication, directly involved in supporting a systematic learning process”. The author considers that there are no restrictions regarding the content, the institutional background or regarding the participants in the educational act involved in this process.

The process of learning being the main way to carry out the training and education, didactic communication must simultaneously comply with a series of conditions: communication must be a deliberate act, and the intention must impede upon changes in the knowledge, affectivity, behavior or actions of the student. It also must be subject to evaluation in relation to a purpose previously established and take place in an organized framework, according to some pedagogical principles. (D. Sălăvăstru, 2004).

Didactic communication leaves its mark on the entire education process, building relationships between the professor, the student, and the student’s family, defusing conflicts, by being an instrument of knowledge, of transmission and discovery of knowledge. It is well known that each participant, directly engaged in the communication process, is involved with all his or her personality, motivations, interests, habits and emotional load. Besides these psychological factors, there is also a series of physiological factors which leave their mark on the communication relationship between professor and student.

Săucan (1999) highlights the fact that there are cases in which the quality of the professor-student relationship has to suffer, that is, when characteristics such as superficiality, narcissism, verbal and gestural aggression, cynicism, indifference, rigidity, authoritarianism can cause message distortions and even lead to communication

blockage. In the case where elements of empathy, kindness, openness, and the ability to understand problems appear in the field of the educational relationship, we can talk about a process of developing the personality of the receiver in the sense foreshadowed by the educational purposes. On the other hand, didactic communication benefits to the fullest from the advantages offered by the student's personality traits, precisely by their introversion and extraversion differences. Depending on the positive emotional load of the professor-student relationship, there appear attitudes such as retreat, avoidance or even opposition, or acceptance, openness and proactivity towards the dialogue proposed by the professor.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

If we refer to the instructional perspective, it is the professor who communicates and directs communication, meaning that he or she initiates the learning process, by presenting information, facts, explanations. Students listen to and receive the scientific didactic message transmitted by the professor, then they repeat and reproduce it. Most of the time, we witness a one-way communication, vertically, bearing the imprint of the professor's didactic competence, his or her personality, well-being and social skills in supporting the comprehension and acquisition of the latter on the part of the students, including a thorough learning process. In view of the new curricular perspectives, the information that is the object of the communication processes in the educational context reflects elements with interpersonal value that produce both predictable and unpredictable effects. (Abic, J. C. 2002, Dinu, M. 2004, Iosifescu, Ș. (coord.) 2001).

Therefore, it turns out that the communication process concerns not only the didactic activity, but it also determines consciously or not, the modification of both the professor's behavior and the student's behavior. This influence going both directions is characterized by the information exchange relationship that occurs between professor and student. (Iucu, R. 2000, Iucu, R. 2001, Joița, E. 2008).

Looking at the literature, Hasson (2012) proposes several types of teachers in relation to the communication / teaching style, having as criterion the communication / teaching style of the teacher: teachers with an active communication style - spontaneous, energetic, with a

sense of humor, charismatic, centered on their own person. This category includes teachers who do not like interruptions, and who have a reduced capacity for empathy. There is thus the risk of contradictions, sometimes conflicts with those hesitant students or those with the same style to divert the attention of the class. Teachers with a communication style based on connection - easily offer pieces of advice related to both the didactic activity, but also to personal life; they offer emotional support, empathizing relatively easily, open-minded; tend to be subjective. Teachers with a communication style based on theorizing, on the contents of the discipline being taught. They are oriented towards analysis, they pay attention to details, and they have a high self-control capacity. For this reason they can be perceived by the students as rigid and distant. Teachers with an organized communication style - are those teachers who can be perceived as boring, non-creative, because they believe that interruptions can affect the rhythm and organization of the teaching and continuity process of communicating didactic information.

In the case in which certain objectives are not achieved, the student may have a state of anxiety that can lead to the reduction or to the blockage of his activity, influencing even the performance expected from the respective task.

### **3. The importance of feedback in the development of human resources**

Feedback is the most powerful single influence that enhances student achievements (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998). In the didactic process, each participant comes with the acquired knowledge, with his or her social skills, and in order for the power ratio in the teacher-student relationship not to be unequal the behaviours follow didactic norms, having a common purpose: thorough learning. Given the high degree of exerting the behavioural influence in the context of the didactic interaction, the education of the communication constitutes an end in itself, a major objective of the Romanian pre-university education system. The flow of information can be blocked, if we do not take into account the fact that information and socio-affective exchanges take place permanently, and the roles of transmitter and receiver are played alternatively by teachers and

students. In this framework of action and re-action, feedback becomes a modelling tool between the two generic partners of the didactic interaction: the teacher and the student. The term feed-back, taken from the vocabulary of cybernetics, means return information, which allows the sender to find out how his message was received and understood. Susan Brookhart (2017) proposes a perspective on this method from the point of view of the effects generated at the micro and macro level. Three lenses are presented: “the microscope lens (“Was the feedback clear?”), the medium level lens (“What did both educational actors learn?”) and the telescope lens (“Did the feedback have the expected results?”)”.

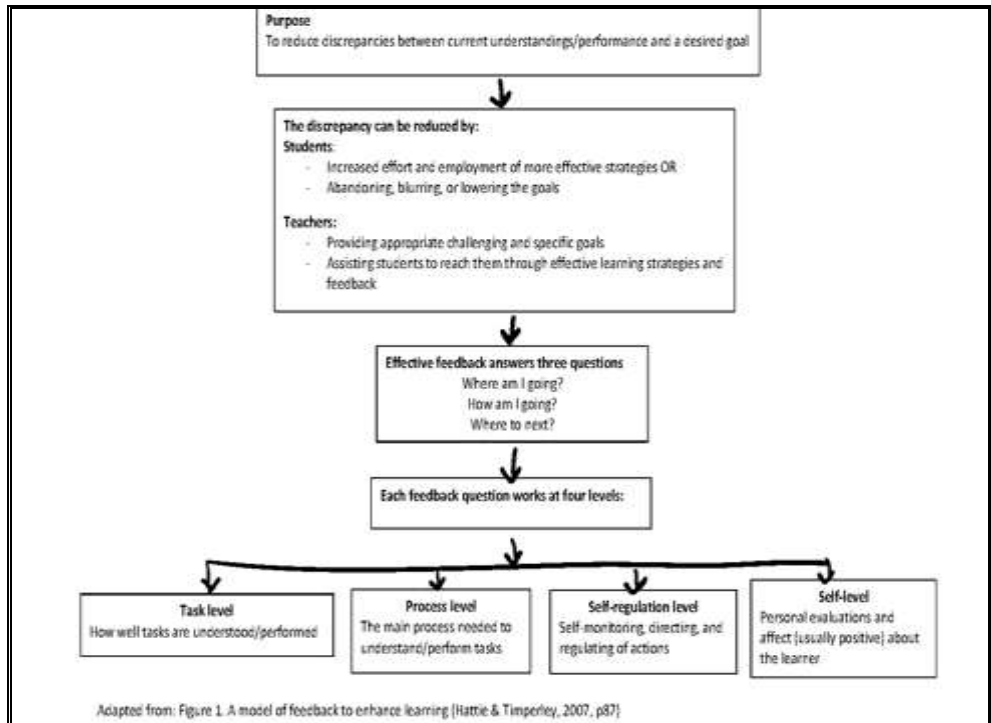
Veal and Anderson (2011, p. 43) propose, separately from the specific feedback, the general feedback (“Congratulations, good job!”). Regarding the degree of motivation associated with positive or negative feedback, Lavigne and Good (2015) demonstrate that positive feedback yields exceptional results if offered as soon as possible after the result was obtained. When referring to the negative feedback given by the teacher to the student, as soon as it is given immediately after the evaluation, there is a risk that the student will not understand the cause of the mistake and associate the mistake with a state of dissatisfaction, which may affect his motivation. In the specific case, where the negative feedback is given by the student's teacher at a certain interval after the evaluation, Lavigne and Good (2015) demonstrate that the student understands the cause of the mistake and can improve their school performance. Researching the literature, we note that Kidman, Hanrahan (2010) demonstrates the beneficial effect of positive feedback on school performance, provided that it is offered to the students frequently. Contrastively, the lack of constant positive feedback can be a demotivating factor for students, so it is important to find and use methods to constantly encourage both the progress and the effort made by the students in the task.

This article explores the meaning of feedback, build on Hattie (2007) model revealed in Figure 1.in the light of recent theoretical developments. It describes four possible levels of feedback that instructors may choose to provide. Effective teaching involves sharing information, an open learning context, constructive tasks, assessing students' understanding of the provided information. Feedback should therefore be useful when it helps students by

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addressing fundamental feedback questions including “Where am I going?”, “How am I going?”, and “Where to next?”. Teachers can also assist by clarifying goals, enhancing commitment or increased effort to reaching them through feedback, determining its impact on student achievement.



**Figure 1: A model of feedback to enhance learning**  
**Adapted from: Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.83**

In broad terms, the feedback allows, by means of its instrumental character, the efficiency of the didactic communication, its adaptive characteristic being obvious. For example, by reporting an unsatisfactory grade by a student, a teacher may propose an intervention plan (feed-back) or may prepare an intervention plan if he anticipates obtaining an unsatisfactory grade (feed-forward). In the context of ideal education system, both teachers and students seek answers to each of the three major questions identified in Figure 1, framed in three dimensions of feed up “Where am I going?”, feedback “How am I going?”, and feed forward “Where to next?”.

In the psycho-pedagogical and communication theory the relationship between feedback and goal-related challenge is complex, is conveyed feedback information that helps teachers and their students to know how they are going. Goals are more effective when students share a commitment to attaining them, because they are more likely to seek and receive feedback (Locke & Latham, 1990). Feedback allows students to set further appropriately challenging goals (with clarity, not vague, to serve the purpose of enhancing learning) thus establishing the conditions for ongoing learning.

Answering this question “How am I going?”, means that the didactic act requires the existence of a different feedback by meaning and function. This question is too often associated to an assessment or testing tool and involves a teacher, or peer, or self, providing information about progress and/or about how to proceed, related to certain task/ responsibility. Depending on the way the student understands the message and depending on the feedback the teacher gets, the act of the didactic communication is regulated.

“Where to next?” question has the most powerful impact on learning. The power of feedforward is associated with greater possibilities for learning: deeper understanding, more determination over the overall learning process. Hattie & Timperley (2007) classified feedback in terms of four levels and noted the interaction of these levels of feedback with the nature of the tasks. If we refer to learning new knowledge or to conduct an experiment, according to Hattie & Timperley, feedback can be about the task or product. In this case, feedback, constantly given in classrooms by the teacher, is most provided in comments on assignments This type is the most common and most students see feedback in these terms.

Referring to the process of creating a product or task completion, the second level of feedback is more effective than at the task level feedback. Feedback at this process level involves error detection methods, more effective information research, complex problem-solving strategies. The third level is more focused on the student’s monitoring of their learning processes. This self-regulation level feedback implies a reduction in the gap between current and desired or expected performance. Is also implies commitment, self-control, self – confidence toward the learning goal. It addresses the way students monitor and self-regulate their learning, providing

greater confidence to engage further on the task, reducing the gap between their position in their learning path and configured outcomes. From another perspective, Jean-Claude Abric (2002, p. 32) identifies four functions of the feed-back:

- a) the function of controlling the understanding, receiving the messages in good conditions;
- b) the function of adapting the message to the characteristics of the participants, and to the difficulties encountered or other events that require a change of content or form;
- c) the social adjustment function through the flexibility of the roles and functions performed by different participants, able to facilitate the understanding of the other's point of view and to help social learning;
- d) socio-affective function: the existence of feed-back determines the increase in the interlocutors' feelings such as safety and satisfaction, motivation and acceptance of the communication situation.

#### **4. Methodological framework**

The main highlight of the present study is to investigate the way the relation between different types of feedback provided by the teacher and their effectiveness in terms of promoting student learning and the way feedback can be used to enhance classroom learning and teaching in pre-university didactic communication in Romania. In this regard, the aim of this study was to reveal students' understanding, perceptions, expectations, and practices in relation to feedback, referring to their previous (pre- university) experience. A survey method was chosen in order to achieve study objectives. Undergraduate students were chosen as the sample population to ensure comprehensive views were captured. A total of 50 subjects were included in this research. Based on these quantitative data, the results are presented and discussed following the afore-mentioned research objectives. Following, three specific research objectives were delineated and further discussed: synthetic presentation of the broad principles of good feedback practice (O1); investigation of students' perceptions of and preferences for feedback, referring to their previous (pre- university) experience (O2). Data were collected by means of a questionnaire; the students were asked to fill in an administrated questionnaire. The questionnaire approached several relevant aspects related to their perceptions of and preferences for feedback, referring to their previous (pre- university) experience.



Quantitative format of a typical five-level Likert item was asked in the following registers: level of agreement (Strongly disagree/Disagree/Neither agree nor disagree/Agree/Strongly agree) in relation to desirability, forms of feedback, perceived value of feedback, corrective action, goal setting, timing and frequency in receiving it; behavioural response to feedback. Qualitative questions involved students describing what they understood by the terms “feedback” and “evaluation” and providing examples of feedback that they had received according to their previous (pre- university) experience. In order to maximise the students’ sample return rate, the survey was distributed via Google Forms (a survey administration app that is included in the Google Drive office suite), a tool that allows collecting information from users, and automatically connected to a spreadsheet that is populated with the survey and quiz responses.

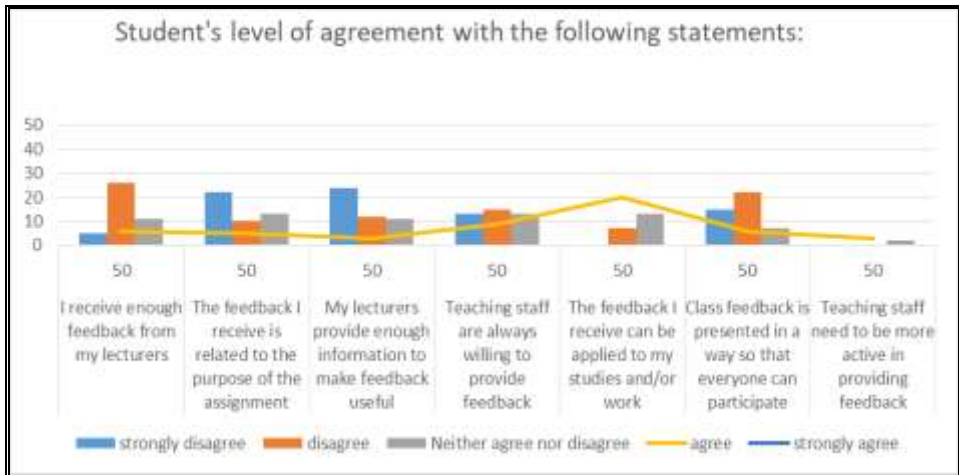
#### **The limits of the research**

Elements such as the student's cultural and personality traits, the students' opinions about the usefulness of the feedback, the dosage, the relevance of the feedback between colleagues influence the impact of the feedback on the school performance. There is no unit of measure with a high predictive value, therefore, it is recommended to continue the research in this field, foreshadowing an interesting future for research on feedback.

#### **5. Feedback as a powerful tool that enhances student achievements**

In this section we propose to present the “Feedback to feedback” survey results, one of the fundamental components in elaborating a practical success model feedback.

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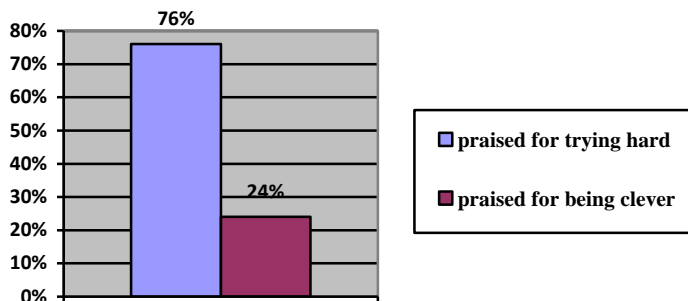


**Figure 1: Student's level of agreement**

Figure 1 summarises the results on a number of the Likert scaled survey questions which relate to the students' level of agreement with the elaborated statements. The findings show that perceptions on the case if the students receive enough information from their teachers, to make the feedback useful, and if received feedback is related to their assignment purpose, were scored lower than the other questions. Teaching staff is always willing to provide feedback. They are less satisfied with the fact that their teaching staff's willingness to provide feedback, also with relevance of feedback related to their studies and/or work. Thus, when the feedback is combined with classrooms features, it can be very powerful in enhancing learning, the figure above shows lower levels of fostering peer and self-assessment and allowing for learning from mistakes. Moreover, given the fact that the learning process is based on various inverse connections, under the principle of the inverse effect, it is necessary to understand correctly the degree of achievement of the objectives set, in terms of: punctuality, correctness, quality of progress made, correlations of content.

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**Figure 2. Student preference for being praised for being clever or for trying hard**

According to our data presented in Figure 2., student prefer to be praised for trying hard, instead of being clever. To take on its instrumental purpose, it is recommended feedback to provide information specifically relating to the process of learning, such as increased effort, motivation, or engagement. It is part of the teaching process to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of the student's task performance and feedback addressed for the cognitive processes learning effort. It is most powerful when the teacher praises the students for trying hard, confirming to students that they are correct in understanding and solving their allocated tasks. Feedback creates a balance between information and required energy.

Referring to understanding the reasons for feedback and the use of feedback, the qualitative survey reveals a comprehensive explanations of feedback practices within the pre university system, comments being based real life feedback they had received in education learning space. Whilst such findings may be indicative of a lack of desire, motivation and/or ability of some teachers to use feedback to its full capacity.

Also, contextual didactic workload may impact the quality, timing, content and feedback delivery. Teachers get feedback from their students' assessments, knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the students onto which they design their own impact. We can draw the conclusion that teachers view evaluation-based feedback as

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making statements about students, and not about their teaching, and thus the benefits of feedback based on such tests it is often diluted.

The quantitative findings were supported and validated through qualitative findings which demonstrate similar themes. For example, pre-university pupils' comments to real life received feedback, reveal similar perceptions, as the qualitative findings. Some of questioned pupils prefer direct feedback (especially about results), others indirectly and implicitly, others prefer feedback oriented to the whole class of students, others accept individual feedback, centered on their person.

Student specific comments regarding suggestions for improving the teacher's feedback, responding to the following question „What are your suggestions for improving the teacher's feedback?“, are:

*„Being honest, but in the same time polite and not aggressive (words and tone).“, „Actually focusing in giving appropriate feedback“, „Feedback should be given more often as it's a little bit hard to know of you are doing well on a subject without feedback“, „Letting them know that their feedback can change someone's life.“, „To give more positive feedback for every minor thing“, „Say congratulation to a student who resolved an exercise for the first time. If that student completes more exercises in a correct way, the feedback should be given occasional.“ „Not to be so bored/boring“, „The teacher's feedback would be emphatic and correct“, „The teacher should be more interested in the emotional side of his students.“, „Be straightforward.“, „Be honest and tough“, „Being nice to the students“, „They should look out more for people that are quite and don't seem to do things or be reppeled by their course. They are the ones that should be looked after with more care. We all need support or a good scolding and sometimes only a teacher can give it to us.“, „Be more patient with students“, „I suggest to be more patient with everyone of us, with our learning rhythm.“, „Be more emotionally involved and if they are not passionate about the subject they teach or do not like working with teenagers or children to find another job to encourage students more“, „ More involvement means getting to know the students. Knowing the student will make it easier to understand them and to design a feedback on their work / activity“, „I*

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*think it would be important for teachers to pay more attention to details."*

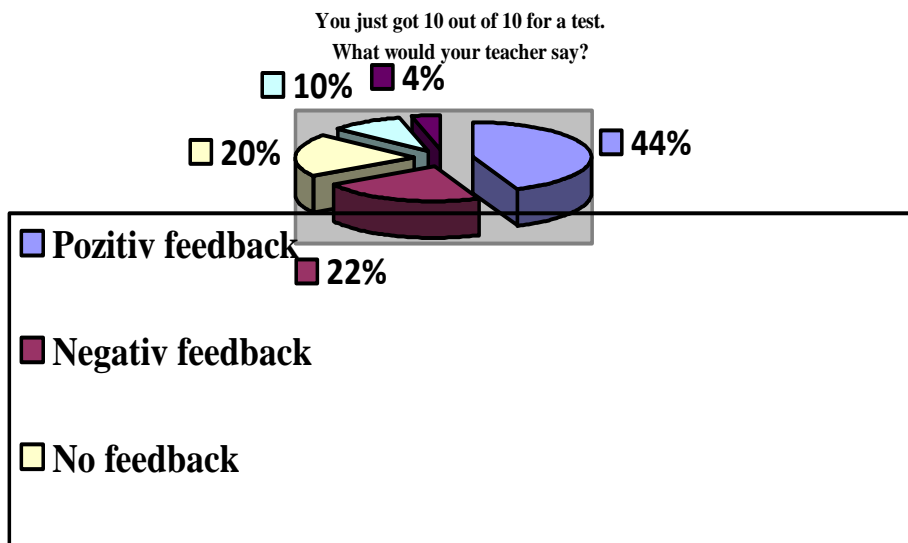
From the students' comments, mentioned above, the feedback is generally welcomed, considered necessary for improving their school performance. They expect feedback to reduce insecurity, some students are more willing to accept self-criticism, others expect continuous feedback, they want teachers to observe and comment on their mistakes, either to protect their pride or to ensure their school progress.

Evaluating the usefulness of the interpretations, at the open question "What critical feedback did you most often receive from your teacher?" there had been found some elements that can be associated with both positive, negative and constructive feedback. It is highlighted that teachers offer feedback with great ease by means of their comments, critics.

However, students should be would encouraged to see the feedback as an anticipation, to give them information related to the criteria for the successful completion of the task.

Regarding the open question "You just got 10 out of 10 for a test. What would your teacher say? ", we notice the fact that even when there is obvious school progress (10 out of 10 for a test), students receive negative feedback from the teachers.

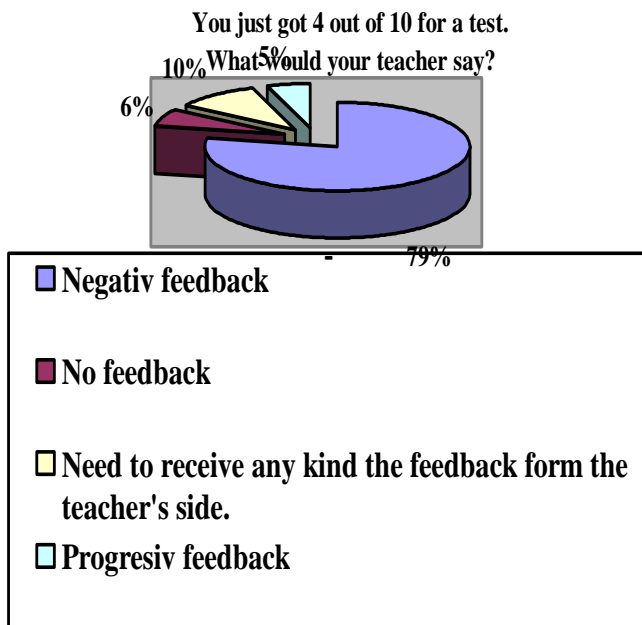
Thus, 22% of pupils received in pre-university learning context negative feedback "You have grades of 10 in vain because you are not a student of 10 and you will never be", "you cheated", "Doubtful, I didn't expect this to happen", "There is room for better ", " That can't be possible. 8 is the student's mark, 9 is the teacher's and 10 is God's. ", " You were lucky this time ", " I will keep my eyes on be you next time. "



**Figure 3. Types of feedback received in case of getting 10 of 10 grade, during evaluation**

A percentage of 20% of pupils received no feedback on maximum grade and 10% of them did not feel the need to receive any kind of feedback form behalf of the teacher. Regarding the constructive feedback, form this analysis, we understood that the teacher does not have this practice 4% pupils received constructive feedback on the learning process. The answers to the open question "You just got 4 out of 10 for a test. What would your teacher say? ", were concentrated under the umbrella of negative feedback, thus: 75% of pupils associate lower results with receiving (on-site and repetitive) negative feedback from the evaluating teacher: " You weren't paying attention to the questions" „a relative joke". Shame, why didn't you learn? How could others do it and you couldn't?". „I'm disappointed ", "They would look weird at me. Disappointed.". You don't concentrate enough. Not putting enough effort. Bad marks. You are 0 capable. There was a teacher always accusing me of learning mechanically and of not actually knowing or understanding what I

was doing. The feedback I most often received was negative. It's not good. I don't understand and I don't know anything. You don't want to learn! You are stupid! You don't show enough interest. Only 5% of the pupils received constructive feedback "What happened? You had to write about ....., the correct answer is....", 6% of the pupils don't receive any feedback and 4% them received positive feedback, when receiving 4 marks out of 10". You could have done better than this, next time you should put more effort. You can do more! ". 10% of the pupils declare that they don't want to receive any kind of feedback from the evaluator.



**Figure 4. Types of feedback received in case of getting 4 of 10 grade, during evaluation**

From this analysis, we come to realize that feedback is based on mistake, only that it is not seen as an opportunity to correct it, to understand it, or to improve subsequent performance. The mistake is perceived by teachers as a limit, as a cognitive deficit, an attention

deficit, a focus on the negative aspect. We anticipate that students will further treat the mistake in exactly the same way.

## **Conclusions**

Feedback is among the specific characteristics of successful learning, being one of the most efficient factors with various results. The way in which the control is exercised by the professor over the student's progress is reflected upon the speed of the procedures: certain corrections are made, the process of learning is resumed in other ways/ through improved methods or there are even some procedures, rhythms, correlations which are changed.

In developing a practical success model of feedback, we draw on the conclusions of the research conducted by Sadler (1989). It proposes to clarify and understand the notion of, "gap": the purpose of the feedback is to reduce the gap between the current stage of the student, where it "is" at the moment, and where it "should" be.

In the process of reducing this "gap", it is recommended that the teacher analyzes correctly, objectively, the current acquisitions in relation to the criteria of success, to which adjustments can be made, formative interpretations enhancing the concentration of the student, directing thus, learning.

The formative interpretation brings with it another perspective: it offers the teachers the opportunity that, through the results of the evaluation, to model the process of teaching, of modelling and supporting in the process of learning, self-appreciation, self-regulation and commitment. There is a clear distinction between the formative interpretation and the summative one.

The perspective upon students' error accessed by pre-university teachers should be focused on the positive aspects, bearing the argument that mistakes can be made both by talented students and those with learning difficulties, teachers, and supports the school progress. And this is the purpose of the feedback.

In order to get the most out of the efficiency of using feedback in class, it is recommended to design educational objectives, transparent criteria of success, to access the feedback through its multidimensional perspective: the three questions of feedback



(„Where am I going? ”,“ How am I going? ”, and " Where to next?") and the four levels of feedback, presented above.

Another recommendation would be to promote "student assessment skills" (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins & Reid, 2009), in order to develop students 'skills of self-assessment, to evaluate their own learning, to take their own evaluation decisions. By actively participating in this type of action, students will be capable to integrate the information in the system with greater efficiency, to make different correlations, to design alternative strategies, to apply the new acquisitions in various ways and situations, thus increasing their motivation.

The tendency of the students to attribute their performance to external factors significantly affects the motivation related to the school performance. Therefore, in the educational context, as it stems from the research conducted, students are frequently exposed to the belief that skills are fixed, rather than presenting a differentiated concept of skills. "The more I try, the more I will succeed" Dweck (1978). Another approach to using feedback to optimize the learning process would be to involve the teacher in psycho-pedagogical assistance centers and offices in conducting specially designed trainings for teachers. One could also analyze ways to incorporate feedback in the learning process: clarity, transparency, objectivity, directing feedback on the task, not the student personally, tackling the error in a positive way, as an opportunity in the learning process. On the other hand, it would be efficient to design psycho-pedagogical counseling activities addressed to students, focused on the irrational beliefs associated with the performance below the potential level, the state of preparation for learning, the locus of control, the management of stress. Feedback becomes a useful tool that transforms and helps the integration of information into the system, ensures the efficiency of the knowledge reorganization process, guarantees the quality of the teaching act.

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