



Ipsative assessment measuring personal improvement

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Potential impact	low
Timescale	long term
Keywords	assessment, feedback, feedforward, learning gain, value-added

What is it?

Ipsative assessment is an approach to evaluating student progress that covers a wide range of assessment and feedback practices. It has been around since 1944, but its fully-fledged implementation into formal education, including in the field of language teaching and learning, is still in its infancy.

The word ‘ipsative’ comes from Latin *ipse*, *-a*, *-um*, which means ‘self’. This gives us an indication of the meaning of ipsative assessment in education: the evaluation of the quality of the performance of a student by reference to their previous performance(s), not by reference to the rest of the cohort (norm-referenced assessment), nor against expected standards based on programme objectives (criterion-referenced assessment). The term ipsative assessment is also used in human resources and psychometric testing, but with a different meaning, to refer to tests where respondents have to select their preferred option out of two or more available ones.

In ipsative assessment, students receive an indication of their achievement that represents the extent of their improvements from their previous assessed task(s)

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in relation to one or more objectives. In turn, ipsative feedback (formal self-referential feedback) describes and celebrates those specific improvements, identifies areas lacking in progress, and proposes feedforward.

Ideally, in ipsative assessment, criterion-referenced grades are not calculated or communicated and, if so, they are kept in the background as a secondary indicator. As for norm-referenced criteria, these are simply incompatible with the spirit of ipsative assessment. Learning gain, the distance between two points in time in a learning journey, is a critical concept in ipsative assessment, but one that deserves problematisation: is it really about the distance travelled, which inevitably leads us to numerical figures (ipsative grading), or is it more about narrating and evaluating the details of a journey that is much richer than the miles it covered (ipsative feedback)?

Example

The delivery of effective ipsative feedback in languages should incorporate tangible comparisons and reflections on at least two different performances throughout a period of time. However, digesting this feedback, typically presented in a combination of annotations to the pieces of work and feedback forms, can be a challenge for students. In addition, contextualising feedback and feedforward comments in tasks that are embodied in formats such as video or websites can be rather tedious and ineffective when using traditional written forms of feedback.

However, thanks to audio-visual feedback, using video feedback tools, such as *Screencast-O-Matic*, language teachers can incorporate the principles of ipsative assessment seamlessly into their feedback. The technology allows the teacher to bring up and visualise two pieces of work on one screen, regardless of their format, point at different parts of both tasks and record the oral comments with the visual indications on both pieces of work, using any other supporting images or resources. Providing oral feedback with visual support is becoming a new approach that can easily break with the cultural conventions of criterion-referenced regimes, allowing the teacher to set the new rules of the ipsative game.

Ipsative feedback should not be used to communicate or justify criterion-referenced marks, but rather to discuss progress in tasks and ways to improve. When numerical marks for a task are required by regulations, there is nothing preventing teachers from releasing any developmental feedback a few days before the mark. That way, a feedforward space for reflection-action is created. At the end of the day, providing feedback is an essential element of teaching, whereas grading should be seen as a more collegial and administrative process that requires other sorts of checks and balances, as they are integral to the awarding powers of the institution (Martínez-Arboleda, 2018). This pedagogy has been introduced experimentally, although under the umbrella of the technology that empowers it, at the University of Leeds (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Mediasite Desktop Capture tool used to provide audio-visual feedback at the University of Leeds

Benefits

For Rattray (2018), ipsative approaches and spaces help learners develop, in a safe manner, “resilience, optimism and hope” (p. 101). These are particularly

important affective attributes in such a performative, personal, emotional, and socially outlooking experience as language learning because the learner is not under pressure to meet externally set standards. Moreover, meta-learning and self-reflection are consubstantial to ipsative feedback. For most authors, ipsative assessment improves learner motivation. This is particularly important for students who require additional support, distance learners, and self-directed learning.

Ipsative approaches are ideal for those practitioners who believe that feedback, as an act of learning support, and criterion-referenced assessment, are two completely different operations which can interfere with each other, both in nature and purpose. For Hughes (2011), the latter places the emphasis on reliability, consistency, and fixed goals that may be out of reach for some learners at the expense of personalised evaluations of incremental progress.

Ideologically and culturally, ipsative assessment is a pedagogically sound response to the alienating consequences of both neoliberal competition-fuelled modes of human relations (Ratray, 2018) and more traditional forms of social control exercised through numerical academic grading (Martínez-Arboleda, 2016). Some of the specific benefits include the introduction of (1) more usable feedback that refers closely to the current performance, (2) task-oriented feedforward, and (3) the closing of the feedback loop. All the above would, according to Hughes (2011), contribute to addressing the shortcomings of criteria-driven assessment regimes.

A form of ipsative assessment for language learning is already used in secondary schools in some countries. Tutors keep track of individual student progression across standardised grades, setting targets, motivating students, and working towards the achievement of higher grades. The best-known indicator in the UK is called ‘Progress 8’.

“ It aims to capture the progress a pupil makes from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school. It is a type of value-added measure, which means that pupils’ results are compared to the

actual achievements of other pupils with similar prior attainment”
(Progress 8, 2016, p. 2).

Despite the merits of progress indicators used in schools, in most educational systems what really seems to matter socially, sadly, is the actual grade achieved at the end, not the speed or the length of the progress. In this context, it is the educators’ role to promote, as much as they can, a change of culture within the current institutional and professional boundaries.

Potential issues

For ipsative assessment to be effective, the design of the assessed tasks has to be approached as part of an assessment plan whose components span strategically throughout the year, or even through a whole qualification. The successive tasks need to contain threads that allow for diachronic and personalised comparison. Relatively open-ended assessed tasks offer more flexibility. Ipsative assessment requires a careful refining of tasks for levels above B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), where students can frequently experience a learning plateau effect. Finally, students need to be educated in the process and art of identifying quality (Sadler, 2010). Telling them what is wrong and what is right with their work is not sufficient.

Looking to the future

In formal education, ‘ipsativity’ will be facilitated by new interfaces and tools enabling tutors to access the feedback history of each student in their virtual learning environment in order to compare consecutive tasks. Learning management systems allow for personalised paths punctuated with tasks, as well as for a very granular, often automatised, monitoring of engagement and performance. This can facilitate teachers’ ipsative endeavours. Portfolios of learning, which are well embedded in our discipline, can be given a greater role as part of an ipsative transformation.

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