

The Implementation of Self-Assessment in EFL Writing Classroom: An Experimental Study

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ABSTRACT

Writing skill is an essential requirement to lifelong learner success, and the way teachers provide feedback for their students on writing is quite challenging. One of the new trends in writing skill instruction is Self Assessment. Self-assessment methods in writing instruction present meaningful ways to promote student writing achievement through reflection and metacognition during the writing process. This paper describes the findings of an investigation on using self assessment in EFL writing classroom. For the purpose of conducting this research, 48 Iranian upper intermediate students, all male and with age range of 20 to 23, were chosen to participate in this investigation. These participants were divided into two equal groups: an experimental group (N=24) who worked on their writings through self assessment and a control group (N=24) who worked on their writings based on the traditional ways. It was found that participants in the experimental group significantly improved their writing proficiency means score, whereas improvement in the control group was not significant. The results confirm that self assessment is successful with EFL students.

Keywords: EFL writing classroom; self Assessment; upper intermediate students; writing skill instruction

1. INTRODUCTION

As educational institutions have taken advantage of multi-media technologies to develop new and innovative modes of language learning, distance and independent learning programs have provided access to learning opportunities for people who would otherwise not be able to participate in regular classes (Kristen Nielsen, 2012). In distance education, students are physically distant from the teacher (and, often, each other) but are nevertheless in contact; in independent learning, students study independently without the aid of a teacher and without the collegial support of other learners.

Assessment in teacher-led distance language programs tends to be addressed in much the same way as in classroom-based learning, in that some exercises may be self-marked by learners, others may be subject to peer-feedback or assessment, and yet others are submitted to the course teacher for assessment (Diltz, J. 2006). Assessment in independent learning programs, whether stand-alone courses or self-access supplements to class teaching, is more

problematic; in the absence of a teacher or other students, the onus is placed upon learners themselves to monitor and assess their own progress and achievement.

Traditional approaches to the self-assessment of language ability are of two main types: (i) objectively-marked discrete-point tests of linguistic knowledge, and (ii) rating scales or checklists (Brindley, 1989; North, 2000; Oscarson, 1989). Objectively tests, although reliable as self-assessment instruments, do not allow learners the opportunity to produce a complex or sustained piece of written or oral communicative performance, one of the objectives of outcomes-based learning. They tend to focus either on the more traditional ‘building blocks’ of language learning (grammar and vocabulary) or on language comprehension (the receptive skills, reading and listening). Such assessment, while it allows learners to check where their linguistic knowledge or understanding might be lacking, does not allow them to evaluate their ability to put their newly-acquired linguistic resources to use in sustained productive performance.

Rating scales and checklists, in contrast, tend to be based on situational descriptions (“I can express ...,” “I can write ...”); and whilst they focus on situated language use, they do not require immediate performance (Kristen Nielsen, 2012). They tend to be relatively unreliable as they not only require learners to make their own interpretation of standards, but are also dependent on the learner having had direct experience of the particular situation (Ross, 1998). Such self-assessments tend not to be linked to specific courses of learning but are more commonly used to estimate proficiency levels in general terms for placement purposes (Brindley, 1989).

Neither of these traditional approaches to self-assessment, although valuable and useful across a range of assessment contexts, allow for the self-assessment of actual productive (written or spoken) performance by learners. Despite the potential for “fruitful development of self-evaluated language learning” afforded by new technologies (Oscarson, 1989, p. 10), there appears to be no precedent for learner self-assessment of specific task-based performance.

Perhaps because the assessment of productive skills is considered to be a “highly-subjective and complex domain” (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000, p. 113), it is typically seen as beyond the reach of learners themselves. Where self-assessment of actual productive performance does occur, it is either in the context of reflection on and selection of work for portfolios, which typically takes place within teacher-led courses and is guided to a large extent by a teacher (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000) and focuses more on process than outcome (Porter & Cleland, 1995), or, where it is more autonomous activity, the focus is typically on the identification of grammatical errors in written texts produced by learners rather than on the overall quality of the text. Learners are provided with marking codes which present them with sample grammatical errors, so that they can mark their work themselves, but which tend not to focus on more communicatively oriented criteria such as content or sociolinguistic appropriateness, text structure and organization, or coherence.

The lack of an autonomous approach to the evaluation of one’s own task-based text production is, therefore, problematic for communicatively-oriented independent learning programs where the aim is to develop in learners the ability to produce communicatively effective pieces of written or spoken text; because as Kristen Nielsen (2012) said there is no teacher to provide feedback on the quality of their written production, learners need to be able to do it themselves with a degree of accuracy if they are to establish a valid sense of their own learning and progress. In an independent learning program which is based on communicative principles, if learners are not able to obtain this feedback, they may also be less motivated to complete the tasks (Warne, B.M., 2008).

1. 1. Literature Review

Over the past 20 years, self assessment has been increasingly used in a range of education settings. According to Blanche and Merino (1989), the first reports on self assessment were published in 1976. Since then, self assessment has continued to expand as a distinct field of study in L2 learning and education. Self assessment and other self-reflective activities usually require learners to grade their peers or their own performance, based on clearly defined task requirements and assessment criteria that are sometimes derived from the learners' input. The types of self assessment described in the literature are varied. They range from standardized questionnaires (e.g., AlFalley, 2004; Bachman & Palmer, 1989; Patri, 2002; Stefani, 2002) to open-ended, informal activities, e.g., reflective diaries and portfolios (e.g., Cottrel, 2000; Donato & McCormick, 1994).

In the field of education and second language acquisition (SLA), the construct of self assessment is usually understood as an alternative means to assess learners' ability. As a result, self assessment research is primarily quantitative in nature and explores the validity and reliability of student self-ratings (e.g., AlFalley, 2004; Bachman & Palmer, 1989; Blanche, 1990; Boud, 1995; Boud & Tyree, 1995; Butler & Lee, 2006; Pierce, Swain, & Hart, 1993) rather than the learning process involved in self-appraisal activities. Research questions usually revolve around two main themes, which can be summarized as follows: (1) Is self assessment a reliable tool for assessing performance? (2) What are the variables likely to affect the reliability of scores, and how can these variables be controlled? The reliability of self assessment is usually measured by correlating the self-assessed performance score with that of the instructor or other external benchmarks (e.g., standardized tests).

Variables affecting self assessment accuracy are diverse, ranging from the domain of assessment to item construction and the learners' individual attributes such as personality traits, affectivity, and level of proficiency (Bachman & Palmer, 1989; Blanche & Merino, 1989; Butler & Lee, 2006; Ross, 1998). These findings suggest that self assessment procedures are too subjective to be used for summative assessment purposes, particularly in environments where the stakes are high.

However, the construct of self assessment in the SLA literature is currently shifting away from issues strictly concerning assessment theory to embrace a broader view of self assessment as a tool for motivating and enhancing learning. Indeed, a renewed interest in self-reflective practices is currently emerging in models and research on motivation and autonomy (e.g., Noels, Cle'ment, & Pelletier, 1999; Noels, Pelletier, Cle'ment, & Vallerand, 2000), as it appears that the transfer of some of the learning responsibilities from the instructor to the learner increases learner motivation. Self assessment is a means by which such a transfer can take place as it provides an opportunity for learners to become increasingly self-regulated. Noels et al. (1999) suggested that feedback, self-reflection, motivation, and autonomy are interconnected, ongoing, dynamic fashion, a sort of "work in progress" for the duration of a course.

They also found in a subsequent study (Noels et al., 2000) that in an autonomy-supportive environment, students were less likely to feel anxious in the learning process and less likely to give up L2 learning. Thus self assessment provides a suitable interface between feedback, self-reflection, and increased autonomous learning, enabling both learner and instructor to reflect on the learning process and to give or receive mutual feed-back (Cottrel, 2000; Noels et al., 1999; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

Anxiety was long ago identified as a major impediment to learning, particularly in its effects on learners' self-efficacy. Tremblay and Gardner (1995) described self-efficacy as the learner's perceived ability (or expectancy) to meet the challenge of language learning in

relation to specific tasks and suggested that anxiety is a “debilitating component of self-efficacy” (p. 508). In other words, self-efficacy and language anxiety are conceptually related but in an opposite direction, and for learning to take place, anxiety levels need to be lowered and self-efficacy boosted. Research has shown a consistent moderate negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997), and a number of studies have shown that speaking is the most likely skill to be associated with foreign language anxiety (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1986, 1990).

Anxiety in the L2 is associated with deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, and low grades in the language course (Gardner et al., 1997), and Horwitz (2001) suggested that anxious language learners tend to underestimate their abilities. Interestingly, some recent research by Mills, Priares, and Herron (2006, 2007) suggested that it is students’ self-efficacy beliefs, rather than anxiety, that are closely related to academic performance.

Clearly, instructors need to help learners develop greater self-confidence (self-efficacy) and thereby reduce their language learning anxiety. Tremblay and Gardner (1995) suggested that instructors should encourage learners to set appropriate goals because “individuals with specific and challenging goals persist longer at a task than individuals with easy and vague goals” (p. 508). Mills et al. (2006) suggested encouraging learners to adopt planning and monitoring strategies in order to foster a more proactive positive linguistic behavior. Both goal-setting and proactive use of strategies enable learners to attribute success or failure to their own level of effort and strategy use, rather than factors outside their control such as luck or task difficulty. This ability empowers learners and helps them develop a greater sense of achievement (Graham, 2004).

Self assessment seems to be a tool well-suited to helping learners to develop appropriate goals and self-regulate or monitor their efforts accordingly (Warne, B.M., 2008). From this perspective, self-reflective activities should not be considered the end point of the process (i.e., self-reporting of past performance), as they are traditionally defined in self assessment research, but rather an ongoing, dynamic tool for reflecting concurrently on past and possible future performance and learning behavior.

This view of learners as active agents in their own learning is also proposed in socio-cultural theory (SCT). Lantieri and Thorne (2006) discussed the critical notion of agency in learning. They described agency as the ability of individuals to assign relevance and significance to things and events (p. 143). This ability is thought to be influenced by the learners’ own personal trajectory, learning goals, and developmental stage.

The more learners are able to exercise agency, the more they become autonomous, self-regulated learners (Finney, 2003). In line with this paradigm, Ushioda (2003) argued that the motivation to learn is not solely located within the individual but is also socially distributed, and that the social unit of the classroom is instrumental in developing and sustaining the motivation of individual learners.

Ushioda suggested that if learners perceive the learning environment as supportive rather than inhibiting, their self-confidence and motivation to interact in the classroom will grow accordingly.

2. METHODOLOGY

2. 1. Research Question

Does using self assessment in EFL writing classroom improve learners writing ability.

2. 2. Research Hypothesis

The implementation of self assessment has no effect of improving EFL learners writing ability.

2. 3. Participant

A total of 94 accounting students of Azad University, Ghorveh Branch, Iran, all male with age range of 20 to 24 were recruited voluntarily to participate in an English Essay Writing Program (EERP), a free credit course. Prior to the program students took a proficiency test in English Essay Writing. According to the obtained scores, 22 students ranked as pre intermediate, 13 students ranked as intermediate, 48 students ranked as upper intermediate, and 10 students ranked as advanced level of proficiency in English Essay Writing. In this research we selected the 48 upper intermediate students to investigate the subject of this research. They were divided into an experimental group (N = 28) and a control group (N = 28). In the experimental group the principles and theories of self assessment in English essay writing were practiced. In the control group, however, the teacher assessment method in English essay writing was practiced. The duration of the program was about two months, sixteen sessions. There were two sessions in each week. Two English Essay Writing teachers were called to participate in this program. The experimental group's teacher was required to use principles of self assessment in their classroom, while the teacher of the control group was required to use teacher assessment method in their classroom.

2. 4. Instruments

In the experimental group the teacher was required to guide students on the following principles which are distilled from Brown (2007):

- *Tell students the purpose of the assessment:* self assessment is a process that many students- especially those in traditional educational system- will initially find quite uncomfortable. They need to be sold on the concept. It is essential that instructor carefully analyzes the needs that will be met in offering self assessment opportunities, and then convey this information to students.
- *Define tasks clearly:* make sure the students know exactly what they are supposed to do. If the instructor is offering a rating sheet or questioner, the task is not complex, but an open ended journal entry could leave students perplexed about what to write. Guidelines and models will be of great help in clarifying the procedure.
- *Encourage impartial evaluation of performance or ability:* one of the greatest drawbacks to self assessment is the threat of subjectivity. By showing students the advantage of honest, objective opinion, the teachers can maximize the beneficial washback of self assessment. Clear assessment criteria can go a long way toward encouraging objectivity.
- *Ensure beneficial washback through follow-up tasks:* it is not enough to simply toss a self checklist at students and then walk away. Systematic follow-up can be

accomplished through further self analysis, journal reflection, written feedback from the teacher, conferencing with the teacher, and purposeful goal setting.

2. 5. Procedure

After the division of students into two groups, they were placed in their specific class and were trained under their specific instructions.

2. 5. 1 The Experimental Group (Self-Assessment Class)

Prior to the start of the program a pretest was run in the first session. Afterward, from the second session the teacher talked about the principles of self assessment in the beginning of the class. After that the teacher gave his instructions on different English Essay Writing. Topics like: punctuation, sentence formation, and different grammatical points were worked in this class. After the instructions of the teacher in those points, students in this class were required to write an essay and use those points. In the following session when they came back with their writing into the class, they did the principles of self assessment on their essays and then the teacher gave some feedbacks on their writings. Table 1 is shown the questionnaire based on that students assessed themselves.

Table 1. Questionnaire of Students' Self Assessment.

| Level of Text | Linguistic Aspects | Excellent | Good | Adequate | Unacceptable | Weak |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------|----------|--------------|------|
| Surface Level | Punctuation | | | | | |
| | Spelling | | | | | |
| | Capitalization | | | | | |
| | Word form Correction | | | | | |
| Sentence Level | Sentence types (Passive Voice, Active Voice, Complex Sentences) | | | | | |
| | Length of sentences by adding or deleting words | | | | | |

After students self assessed themselves, the teacher taught other English essay writing tips. In the final session the posttest was run and the pretest posttest design was completed.

2. 5. 2 The Control Group (Teacher Assessment Class)

Like EG class, in CG class there were two session of class each week for students. In the first Session of the program the pretest was held. Like the EG class each session the teacher prepared some tips and points of English essay writing. Students were required to write about a matter in regard to use the instructed points and tips. The following session when students came to the class with their essays the teacher did correction on their essays based on the traditional teacher assessment method.

The procedure was quite different from the EG class. Students delivered their essays to the teacher and he did the assessment and informed students on the results and also gave the needed feedbacks to the students. It should be stated that due to the time factor students of CG class had much more time in regarding to use teacher feedback in comparison with EG class. In the final session the posttest was run.

3. RESULTS

The results of this investigation indicate some interesting points. First the descriptive statistics of both groups is illustrated in Table 2 then there is a discussion on the research question and research hypothesis.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of EG and CG.

| | Test | Mean | Standard Deviation | N |
|----------|----------|---------|--------------------|----|
| EG Class | PRETEST | 60.0417 | 18.36935 | 24 |
| | POSTTEST | 73.4167 | 11.65786 | 24 |
| | Total | 66.7292 | 16.65257 | 48 |
| CG Class | PRETEST | 60.8333 | 17.07443 | 24 |
| | POSTTEST | 63.2083 | 11.83576 | 24 |
| | Total | 62.0208 | 14.58284 | 48 |

Table 2 illustrate the capability in comparing the two groups. As one can see, in the pretest time the mean score of the both groups-EG Class 60.04 and CG Class 60.83- are nearly the same that are a good confirmation for the proficiency test that divided students into different proficiency level groups. But with the start in the program and placing students in the experimental group whose assessment procedure was based on self assessment and the control group whose assessment procedure was based on teacher assessment one can see the way the means score became different. In the posttest time the mean score of EG class was 73.41 that improved about 13.37 scores.

The mean score for CG class was 63.20 that improve only about 2.37. The comparison between the two groups means score- about 10.21- also show this fact that the improvement in the EG class is much more in the posttest time. In this investigation, for the purpose of clearer decision making on the research question and research hypothesis a *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects* was conducted. Table 3 is devoted to this data analysis.

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects.

| Source | Variable | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|--------|----------|-------------------------|----|-------------|-------|------|---------------------|
| Test | EG Class | 2146.688 | 1 | 2146.688 | 9.070 | .004 | .165 |
| | CG Class | 67.688 | 1 | 67.688 | .314 | .578 | .007 |

a. R Squared = .165 (Adjusted R Squared = .147)

b. R Squared = .007 (Adjusted R Squared = -.015)

The information obtained from *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects* is good reason for rejection of the null hypothesis. The $p = .004$ in the EG class indicates the rejection of null hypothesis and confirms that the implementation of self assessment has effect of improving EFL learners writing ability. The answer to the research question is also positive. The obtained information shows that self assessment improved Iranian EFL upper intermediate students essay writing.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study supports the hypothesis that the implementation of self assessment in the EFL writing classroom has significant effect on improving EFL English writing abilities, thus supporting the findings of previous investigations (Mills, Pajares, and Herron; 2006, 2007 and Noels et al; 2000). It was found that gains in knowledge and improvement of writing abilities tends to be larger with the implementation of self assessment in the writing classrooms. As an encounter, the participants of the experimental groups demonstrate a mean score improvement about 13.37 in a two month period program.

As a whole, the results are consistent with those of Hirvela & Pierson (2000), who found that it is possible for L2 learners to improve their writing abilities with implementing self assessment in writing classrooms. The findings confirm earlier studies (Brindley, 1989; North, 2000; Oscarson, 1989) in that students who are using self assessment in regard with their writings assessing can improve their writing abilities. It is important to note that the learning condition and context of the present study is an EFL context so further researches may be required to investigate ESL contexts. The participants of the study were in the upper immediate level of proficiency so further researches should investigate other level of proficiency in regard to the implementation of self assessment in writing classrooms.

The study sheds light on the way that self assessment in the writing promotes students English Essay Writing, especially in the EFL upper intermediate context. If self assessment implemented in upper intermediate, and advanced level, students can gain knowledge in English Essay Writing.

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