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Implementing Self-assessment in the Second Language Classroom

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Abstract

The increased popularity of learner-centered second language classrooms has generated an interest in methods of assessment appropriate to such classrooms. Self-assessment, an assessment technique that allows learners to take responsibility for their own learner outcomes (Geeslin, 2003), is one type of assessment that meets the goals of learner-centered classrooms. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), for example, has been applied to a comprehensive self-assessment tool, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which promotes and recognizes the importance of learner-directed assessment (Little, 2005), and engenders learner autonomy. The United States, however, has yet to fully embrace this type of nontraditional assessment (Van Houten, 2004).

This paper will provide a brief introduction of CEFR-based self-assessment (including the ELP), discuss the rationale for using self-assessment in the classroom, and offer advice to teachers on creating and implementing self-assessment tools that are specific to the needs and goals of their classes.

Introduction

By the time students enter a post-secondary ESL classroom in the United States, they are likely to have spent many years developing their own language learning styles and expectations of what will occur inside a language classroom. A traditional and still common pattern of teacher-student interaction, one in which teachers are responsible not only for decisions regarding what students should learn and when they should learn it, but also for assessing how well students are learning, is likely to have been long established as the norm in students’ minds. This traditional conception of the relationship between teacher and student is quite persistent and its implications are far reaching. Teachers often find that students are over-reliant on constant feedback and are unsure of how to take active control of their learning processes. The perception of the teacher as the sole guide through the language learning process also means that teachers hoping to promote learner autonomy and motivation in innovative ways may encounter some resistance from their students.

If one of the preeminent goals of education is to prepare students for a lifetime of self-guided and self-reflective learning, students need to be provided with opportunities to develop the skills required of autonomous learners. This paper will describe ways in which self-assessment in the language classroom can promote learner autonomy as well as offer a description of how self-assessment activities have been utilized by the authors.
Background

During the 1970s, the Council of Europe embarked on a project, the goals of which included the development of common language proficiency benchmarks that could be used by language teaching professionals and language learners throughout Europe. The project’s participants also hoped to encourage public conversation about the language learning and assessment process (Little, 2005, p. 324). The project culminated in the development of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which outlines benchmarks of language proficiency, and its companion and supplement, the European Language Portfolio (ELP). The ELP is of particular interest to language teachers wishing to implement some element of self-assessment in their classrooms as it provides a practical way for language learners to be included in the process of assessing their own proficiency.

Many incarnations of the ELP, a language assessment tool now widely used in Europe, have been developed. Those versions designed for use by adolescent and adult language learners consist of three required components: 1) a collection of work the language learner believes best represents his or her second language (L2) achievements, 2) a language biography, in which learning goals are set and progress is recorded, and 3) a language passport, in which the language learner describes his or her own L2 experiences and qualifications and assesses his/her proficiency using a self-assessment grid containing can-do statements representative of each proficiency level described in the CEFR (Little, 2005).

Little (2005) also describes the “complementary pedagogical and reporting functions” of the ELP (p. 325). Learner autonomy is fostered and developed through the repeated examination of goals and progress that proper upkeep of the ELP necessitates. When the portfolio owners/users continually update the ELP, they are also maintaining a current report of their language experiences, achievements, and proficiency. The benchmark descriptors (in the form of learner outcome statements) supplied by the CEFR support both of these functions and serve as a common foundation on which learners can base concrete statements regarding their proficiency and accomplishments.

Within the context of the CEFR and the ELP, self-assessment is used to evaluate language proficiency and report learning progress, but how can teachers implement self-assessment techniques on a smaller scale, within their individual classrooms? Many teachers and other stakeholders express concern about learner objectivity and ability to accurately assess their own performance on language-related tasks. These concerns, and the degree to which they appear to be founded on the results of empirical investigation, are discussed in more detail in the Limitations section of this paper.

Traditional forms of assessment alone cannot be expected to provide a complete picture of what students are learning and how well they are learning it. Falchikov (2005) points out that “over reliance on a single [assessment] technique can have adverse effects, as many aspects of learning are not measured by any one
assessment method” (p. 31). Alternative methods of assessment enable teachers to focus on aspects of the learning process, such as student involvement, usually ignored by more traditional approaches. Self-assessment tools may therefore be particularly attractive to teachers hoping to broaden their students’ conception of the learning process to include self-direction and shared responsibility.

The domain of language assessment, however, even within the classroom, is broad enough to require teachers to make some principled decisions regarding inclusion of self-assessment components. Questions regarding the appropriate time and place for self-assessment must be addressed. For example, according to Dickinson (as cited in Ekbatani, 2000), self-assessment may not be an appropriate technique when used in high-stakes situations, such as when assessing achievement or determining placement within a language program. Ekbatani characterizes self-assessment tools as appropriate additions to formative (rather than summative) assessment in the language classroom. Once the appropriate time and place for self-assessment has been determined, the teacher can begin to think about the design of specific assessment instruments.

**Assessment Design**

Brown (2004) outlines a number of possibilities for both informal and formal self- and peer-assessment tasks, which he delineates by language skill. Because different skills require different methods of psychometric elicitation of a learned skill, it is important that the language skill being assessed is defined first and used as a foundation for the assessment design. Additionally, self-assessment design must take into consideration time. Ideally, the assessment task should be executed relatively close to the time in which the language task occurs, so that learners are able to evaluate themselves while the language task is still fresh in their minds (Butler & Lee, 2006).

In the same way that materials for classroom use are tailored to the specific needs of a class and lesson, it is important to tailor self-assessments so that the assessment is specific to the task being assessed (Butler & Lee, 2006). The “Presentation Self-Evaluation” self-assessment worksheet (see Appendix A) is a demonstration of how to construct a task-specific self-assessment. For an advanced academic-based speaking and listening class, the instructor of the course (a colleague of the authors of this paper) took student-defined characteristics of what makes a successful and unsuccessful oral presentation and created a checklist for students to use as a means for students to critically evaluate their skills as an orator in English. At the end of the class period in which students gave their oral presentations, she asked students to evaluate both their speaking performance and the steps they took to prepare for said oral presentations. In designing this assessment, she considered two design aspects worth consideration: item content and item ordering.

With respect to content, the instructor is asking students essentially two questions: What did you do well? and What could you improve? If these questions were to stand alone, their vague nature would not elicit focused or accurate self-assessment responses. To help guide students’ responses towards the original purpose of the self-evaluation (getting students to evaluate the ways in which they
present and prepare for an oral presentation), she presented students with twelve specific statements to check, which specifically addressed what they had done well and what they could improve upon with respect to their presentation. To help students produce inwardly-focused responses to the assessment statements, she incorporated “I” language to encourage the language learner to internalize the statements more readily when evaluating themselves than if the statements were nondescript third-person statements (e.g., *The student spoke loudly and clearly*). Unlike open-ended self-critique questions, a checklist format does not offer much qualitative language production on the part of the self-evaluator. To probe for a deeper self-evaluation, the instructor’s checklist provided students with an “other” section for students to rationalize freely why they had checked statements or what they had done specifically that could not be answered by the statements given by the instructor.

With regard to the ordering of the items, it is important to recognize that in the first half of a self-evaluation, positive statements are presented first, while negative statements are presented second. By asking students to evaluate their strengths first, their confidence is inflated, so that when they are asked to reflect on their weaknesses, students do not become overly critical or become overwhelmed by their shortcomings. Fortunately, or unfortunately, a formal grade still carries a hefty weight of performance measurement that students can understand. To help synthesize the self-knowledge gained by the language learner, the instructor could ask the students to assign a grade they think most deserving based on their self-evaluation. The instructor could also present students with a grading rubric and scaffold how to rate assignments as one way in which to foster student understanding of how grades are assigned for the course.

**Implementation**

While self-assessment can be used in second language testing situations, the focus of this paper is to demonstrate how self-assessment can be implemented in a classroom setting, enriching the classroom environment and strengthening learner autonomy. However, the way in which to accurately assess one’s language skills or performance is not necessarily self-evident. Students who have experienced an educational system that is deeply rooted in a testing culture where the teacher predominantly assigns the grade may not necessarily find it easy or manageable to assess themselves. These learners cannot be expected to assess themselves accurately without some guidance. As suggested by Little (2005), it is the role of the instructor to mediate the learning of self-assessment through attainable steps of preparation and practice that allow learners to critically look at their own language skills and offer accurate opinions as to their strengths and weaknesses. Rea-Dickens (2001) outlines a model for classroom assessment which advocates an initial planning stage that identifies the purpose of the assessment, choice of assessment activity, and preparation of learners for the assessment.

When creating a self-assessment task, the first thing an instructor must do is to determine the purpose of the assessment. In order to elicit a better quality self-assessment from students, it is key to have the self-assessment situated and specific
to a task. Self-assessment that is directly related to a task warrants more accurate self-assessment than unrelated self-assessment (Butler & Lee, 2006). For example, if the language performance on which students are to assess themselves is writing, but a self-assessment task asks them to evaluate their oral classroom presentation skills, then the self-assessment is meaningless because the target of assessment is not being reached.

To illustrate how to determine assessment purpose, consider a self-assessment that the first author of this paper used with an ESL intermediate reading and writing class. The task was an in-class, 45-minute, timed midterm essay that was formally assessed by the aforementioned instructor and informally assessed by the students themselves. Essay evaluation criterion included content, organization, and grammar. The instructor’s purpose of doing a self-assessment in conjunction with the writing task was twofold: 1) to involve students in the writing evaluation process by giving students a better understanding of how timed-writing, a genre that academically-bound language learners need to master, is formally evaluated, and 2) to show students what to expect from instructors outside of their current reading and writing class.

In the case of the mid-term self-assessment used by the first author, the day after students took the in-class midterm, the self-assessment preparation phase of assessment was begun (Rea-Dickens, 2001). The class was presented with a mock student essay that answered the same prompt as their own mid-term exam. Students read the essay and were given an assessment worksheet (see Appendix B) to complete with guided questions that focused on content, organization, and grammar— the three areas of writing which the instructor wanted students to critically evaluate. Through a scaffolding process (Rea-Dickens, 2001), the instructor introduced questions one-by-one from the self-assessment and asked students, as an entire class, to comment on whether the essay met the characteristics of a good timed written essay, characteristics which the class had brainstormed the day before the mid-term examination. On an overhead projector (OHP), the instructor then showed students how to articulate these thoughts on the assessment worksheets in a written format, taking care to note that complete sentences that offered clear reasoning were better responses than simply a yes or no answer. The more specific learners can be about their self-assessment responses, the better, since students will need specific details for follow-up activities based on their responses. In the excerpt below, the student communicated one specific feature of language which she wanted to specifically address:

English is different from Chinese. Sometimes I don’t know the “word Location” is right or not. For example, “We need to face it and find some ways which negative side to replace.” Or “We need to face it and find more ways to rephrase its negative side. I don’t either know about “English is different from Chinese.” or “English is different to Chinese”.

After this scaffolded evaluation, the instructor returned the students’ original mid-term exams and students completed the self-assessment worksheet on their own. For some students, the self-assessment task may still be troublesome in its novelty. In this case, instructors are encouraged to offer one-on-one assistance with the student
either during an in-class self-assessment workshop or during outside-of-class student-instructor conferences. As a follow up to the self-assessment task, it is important for learners to use the self-awareness knowledge they have gained from the self-assessment and apply this knowledge to language development. For example, on the mid-term writing self-assessment, the revision section of the assessment worksheet provided students an opportunity to hypothetically describe what they would do if they had more time to write their mid-term exams. In the case of the above student, she chose to improve the content of her essay, stating “I would like to add more examples to complete my paper because that can make reader more understand.”

By taking the time to write down these self-discovered ways to improve her essay, the student was able to then rewrite and revise her midterm examinations, which offered her a chance to focus her writing according to the areas intentionally assessed by both the formal and informal assessments: content, organization, and grammar. The revised version of her essay resulted in a half-letter grade improvement from her original essay.

**Limitations**

The benefits of learner-directed assessment may be gaining recognition by teachers, yet there are still some common stumbling blocks to implementing this type of assessment in the classroom. Teachers wishing to include a self-assessment component in their language curriculum often express reservations about doing so on the basis of reliability and validity of these measures. If each student is rating his or her own performance, what is the common standard to which they are to be held? Is inter-rater reliability not important? If the main goals of using self-assessment in the classroom are to encourage self-reflection and learner autonomy, then this problematic aspect of self-assessment may assume secondary importance. These concerns may also be addressed by gaining a better understanding of the factors that affect accuracy of self-assessment.

As mentioned above, there is evidence for the necessity of providing training and experience in order to develop the learner’s capacity for self-assessment. Ekbateni (2000) reports on a 1990 study by Heilenman suggesting that less proficient students tend to over-estimate their own language abilities while higher proficiency learners are more likely to be overly severe in judging their own performance on language-related tasks. AlFallay (2004) also reports on the likelihood that learner traits such as motivation, self-esteem, classroom anxiety, and achievement play a role in the accuracy of self-assessment. It may be the case that more experienced and higher proficiency students are able to compare their own L2 performance to some external standard and are therefore more aware of their own limitations.

Ekbateni (2000) also describes the possible role that language domain or sub-skill may play in the reliability of self-assessment tools: productive skills appear to submit to self-assessment more reliably and accurately than do receptive skills. More specifically, within the productive domain, students are more accurate when assessing their own speaking skills than when asked to rate their writing abilities.
The nature of the self-rating task with which students are presented may also affect the accuracy of the ratings produced. Pierce, Swain, and Hart (1993) point out that the more concrete, specific, and contextualized the particular self-rating task is, the more highly its results are to correlate with ratings on more objective assessment measures. Questions such as Are you able to understand someone giving you directions to the store? yield more accurate self-assessment than questions such as How well are you able to understand spoken English?

Though the opportunity for self-assessment and the attendant perceived increase in student power and autonomy may be welcomed by many language learners, teachers utilizing self-assessment tools may also encounter reluctance and confusion from some students. Bone (1999) describes the main purpose of self-assessment as being that of improving student performance and reducing the reliance on continual teacher-supplied feedback. She points out, however, that many students actually resist the opportunity to assess their own learning, believing that assessment is the domain of the instructor alone. Such reluctance on the part of students might provide an excellent opportunity to clarify the goals of self-assessment with the student individually or with the class as a whole. It can also lead to a useful discussion of the purposes served by classroom assessment, and formative assessment in particular.

Ultimately, the purpose of self-assessment is not to take the burden of assessment off instructors, but to allow for the internal reflection of the language learner. Using self-assessment in the classroom requires time and practice on the parts of both the student and instructor in order to foster accurate and useful reflections and self-evaluations. Establishing concrete purposes for assessment and preparing students to evaluate their own language skills are cornerstones of good self-assessment practice and should not be ignored by instructors when implementing self-assessment as part of a classroom assessment regimen.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to suggest ways in which some of the goals that motivated the ambitious CEFR ELP, namely the self-assessment aspect, can be embraced on a small scale in individual language classrooms. As the authors of this paper have attempted to demonstrate, careful scaffolding and training can enable students to adopt a more self-evaluative attitude towards second language learning. This shift in assessment practice can facilitate the type of active learning that is a primary goal of student-centered pedagogy. Although implementation is limited at this time, it is hoped that the ability of self-assessment to encourage learner autonomy will lead to its greater implementation in the second language classroom in the future.
Author Note

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References


Appendix A: Sample Presentation Self-Evaluation

1. What do you think you did well in your presentation?

   _ I understood the whole article.
   _ I looked up and defined for the class all important terms I did not know.
   _ I asked a good quiz question that forced my classmates to pay attention.
   _ I organized my presentation clearly.
   _ I coordinated well with my group members and connected my part with the overall idea of the article.
   _ I asked my teacher questions about things I didn’t understand.
   _ The notes I used did not take many sentences straight from the article.
   _ I was ready to respond to questions about the article.
   _ I spoke loudly and clearly.
   _ I used transition words to signal main ideas and details.
   _ I did not rely on notes too much and did not read straight from my note cards.

2. What do you think could have been improved?

   I did not understand the whole article.
   _ I didn’t look up or define for the class all important terms I did not know.
   _ I didn’t ask a good quiz question that forced my classmates to pay attention.
   _ I didn’t choose the main relevant points.
   _ I didn’t organize my presentation clearly.
   _ I didn’t coordinate well with my group members and didn’t connect my part with the overall idea of the article.
   _ I didn’t ask my teacher questions about things I didn’t understand.
   _ The notes I used took too many sentences straight from the article.
   _ I wasn’t ready to respond to questions about the article.
   _ I didn’t speak loudly or clearly.
   _ I didn’t use transition words to signal main ideas and details.
   _ I relied on notes too much and read straight from my note cards. Other:

3. What grade do you think you deserve (percent %)?
Appendix B: Evaluating Your Own Work

Directions: Carefully read through your midterm essay and answer the following questions as honestly and critically as you can. Write in complete sentences only.

**Content**
Have you answered the test question? How so?

Have you supported the solutions you’ve suggested (e.g., used examples to strengthen your point)? Write the support in the space below.

If you have not supported the solutions you’ve suggested, write in the space below what kind of support you would give if you had more time.

**Organization**
Are your ideas organized and separated into paragraphs? If not, how could you change your writing so that your ideas are more organized?

**Grammar**
What do you think are your grammar strengths in this essay? Write them in the space below.

What do you think are your grammar weaknesses in this essay? How could you change these parts to make them stronger? Explain.

**Revision**
If you had more time to write this essay, what would you add, change, or delete? Explain.

On a grading scale of 1-5, what grade would you assign your essay? Please circle the grade number below.

1 = very poor

2 = below average

3 = average

4 = above average

5 = excellent