

The Challenge of Student Self-assessment in Language Education

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to illustrate some ways in which learners of a language may engage in the monitoring and assessment of what they are learning. Traditionally it has been held that a learner cannot, for logical reasons, have much to say in such matters. The basic argument of that position is that self-assessment is subjective and therefore unreliable and of little value.

This paper represents a challenge to this view. While it is true that a person's estimate of his/her own ability is inherently subjective, that does not necessarily mean that it is unreliable, or that it is unimportant or without value. Both theoretical work and practical advances indicate that subjectively grounded assessment can yield reasonably dependable results, as well as have other positive effects. In this paper, I will first briefly review some theoretical arguments and research findings which have contributed to the development of self-assessment practices and will then deal with the practical side of the approach. In so doing, I will describe some concrete self-assessment strategies and materials and indicate how they have been presented and used, both in classroom work and in assessment more generally.

Finally, I will sum up the most important points of my paper and formulate some arguments that challenge the competing and fairly common view that students should not have a role in the assessment of something they are still learning.

Keywords

Student self-assessment, Language learning

Introduction

The general thesis of this paper is that if students develop a greater sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses in their work, they stand a better chance of reaching the goals they are striving for. Various indicators may be cited in support of this proposition. Theoretical work, particularly in the field of metacognition, suggests that self-assessment skills play a distinct role in learning (Rolheiser, 1996; Hartman, 2001; Andrade, 2010). There also exists empirical evidence to support such work. Research has shown that students are often capable of judging their learning progress and achievement levels in a relatively accurate way (Oscarson, 1997, Ross, 1998). It has also been found that the way criteria are defined is crucially important (Rolheiser and Ross, 2012). Empirical evidence furthermore indicates that self-assessment skills have an advantageous impact on attainment in a more general sense, i.e. across different subject areas (Sebba et al., 2008).

It is furthermore the case that current educational practice tends to mirror the educational shift discussed in this article. Modern democratic, collaborative and socioculturally oriented teaching strategies call for active participation by the students themselves in the monitoring and evaluation of their learning.

Finally, the powerful and widely embraced concept of life-long learning can be brought to bear on the topic discussed here. There is a growing need in many countries for developing long-term learning skills among their citizens (European Commission, 2013). As a result, it is believed that experience with self-managed forms of learning and assessment is becoming increasingly important, particularly in working life contexts (Boud et al., 2000; European Union, 2009).

After these introductory remarks let us now turn our attention to the practical application of self-assessment. Four examples will be given.

Self-assessment (SA) in practice

Reference will be made to the use of self-assessment in four different functions and perspectives. They represent self-assessment ...

- (i) as an instance of goal-setting, and as described in an Internet-based materials support package for teachers and students, linked to a specific school curriculum,
- (ii) as a research object in the context of a study of everyday classroom learning,
- (iii) as a constituent part of a language testing and language diagnosis system, and
- (iv) as a defining characteristic of portfolio assessment.

Collectively these examples bear witness to the value that has been attached to learners' and other language users' own perceptions of their language abilities and language experiences.

Example (i)

SA as described in an Internet-based materials support package for teachers and students, linked to a specific school curriculum

The introduction of self-assessment practices may take many different forms. Most commonly, it starts in a small and indirect way as a teacher-initiated activity in the classroom. The task may be for the students to try to visualize their immediate past achievements (in terms of, for instance, What did I learn yesterday? or How well have I mastered what we have been practicing today?), or to show their awareness of the reasons for doing what currently happens to be on the school timetable. At a more advanced level the introduction and practice of student self-assessment may be integrated into long-term project assignments (c.f. Example ii below) or extended portfolio work (c.f. Example iv below).

There also exist various kinds of practical guidance and support materials, both for teachers and students, that have been found quite helpful, and which in some cases are freely available on the Internet. A modest example is the set of “Materials for self-assessment in English” for the upper secondary level which was published on the Swedish National Agency for Education website in 2001 (Skolverket, 2013a). This resource is related to a central tenet of the Curriculum followed, namely that there should exist a shared student-teacher responsibility for the planning and evaluation of students’ learning. The core directive on this point is that:

“Teachers should:

...

- together with the students plan and evaluate the education”

(Skolverket 2013b, p. 11)

More generally, the goals for the teaching and learning of English, in this particular curriculum, focus on communication and on students’ active engagement in their studies and in assessment. In the spirit of both the present and the previous curricula, students should, *inter alia*, “develop the ability to assess their results and be able to relate the assessments to their particular learning conditions”. Promotion of a certain capacity for self-assessment is thus considered an important educational objective.

The set of materials provides schools with some basic information on how self-assessment may be introduced as a regular feature of English as a foreign language education (Skolverket, 2013a). I include a brief description of it here, in the first place because it illustrates a possible way of supporting students’ self-reflection on learning as seen from a central administrative perspective, i.e. not only as seen from the point of view of the individual classroom teacher.

The main parts of the set are:

- A general *introduction* for teachers in which the content and purpose of each component of the materials are detailed. It offers some ideas of how the different parts may be best presented and used in classroom activities.
- An *English usage checklist* (in English) that students may use in order to map out the contacts they have with the language outside of school, and that can thus remind them of valuable external learning opportunities they often have in their everyday lives.
- A *Student Background Questionnaire* (in English), which contains questions on experiences in using English in various contexts. This instrument gives students an opportunity to become more aware of how language skills are often acquired. It may also be used as a basis for the planning of course work. Questions for discussion (in English) about language learning in general, or about some specific areas of learning, are also provided.
- A *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* (in English) consisting of “situated assessment items” to be used by students to assess their knowledge of English

in a number of common language use situations. The situations are representative of goals in the curriculum.

- An account of the *Theoretical background* of autonomous assessment, the reasons for its use, as well as a review of research evidence and experience gained from the application of self-assessment. Its overall aims are to contextualize the use of self-assessment in the language classroom and motivate students in the use of such self-assessment.
- A *List of references* of books, reports, and articles dealing with assessment in general, autonomous learning, the use of portfolios, and self-assessment.

The instructions for teachers emphasize that students need to be informed very carefully about the nature and purposes of these materials. It is stated that the link to important goals in the curriculum should be made very clear. It is also pointed out that students need to be made aware of the fact that self-assessment is not an *alternative* to teacher assessment (and in this sense self-assessment does not challenge teacher assessment). The message is that it should be viewed, rather, as a complement to other forms of assessment and, moreover, as much a part of the process of *learning* as a mechanism for assessment. The challenge is for everyone involved to consider the likely consequences of this proposition and to act on it in accordance with their experience and beliefs. For more on this, see, for instance, Boud et al. (2000) and Oscarson (2013).

This site, with its guidance and support materials, has been in place for upwards of a decade. There is no way of knowing, exactly, to what extent they have been used over the years, but informal evaluation and contacts with schools indicate that they have been well received among both teachers and students. A sizable number of downloads are registered each year. The intended goal, provision of an easily accessible and challenging stimulant for students' reflection on their achievements, as well as for student-teacher discussion of individual progress and development, has no doubt been met.

Updating of the content of a resource of this kind will of course always be needed. A revised version of this particular set of self-assessment materials, with reference to the conditions set out in the newer curriculum (of 2011), is scheduled for publication in November, 2013.¹

Example-(ii)

SA as a research object in the context of a study of everyday classroom learning

My next practical example is taken from a research project entitled *Self-Assessment of Learning: The Case of Languages (SALL)* (Oscarson, 2001). This project includes a major study which focuses on the development of writing skills at the intermediate level of learning (for a full report on the design and results, see Dragemark-Oscarson, 2009). The practice model studied was that of process writing, i.e. the approach to

¹ Roger Persson, Skolverket; personal communication

teaching writing which involves recursive elaboration of drafts (through planning, revising, and editing of the text) with a view to producing an improved “publishable” end product (c.f. for instance Hedge, 2000, p. 299ff). A central objective was to find out to what degree 16-18 year old students are able to make independent and accurate judgments of their achievements based on such practice. Four classes at two levels in a technical upper secondary school completed written assignments as part of their ordinary EFL courses; a number of assessment tools, such as questionnaires, can-do lists, interviews, and tests, were also administered and used in the evaluation of results.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the practical self-assessment activities that formed the basis for the study. Due to lack of space, not all of the rich set of procedures and materials used can be reviewed here. For further information on these things as well as on the more detailed results, I refer to the complete report cited above.

The first phase of the project was devoted to a close reading of the curricular goals for writing. Students were then given the opportunity to inquire about, and discuss, the set criteria for different levels of achievement. Typical points raised and examined were:

- What are the requirements for a pass grade in writing (in terms of content, linguistic accuracy, etc.)?
- What is required for a pass with special distinction?
- For a straight pass? etc.

After this, students were asked to assess a few texts written by other students for a previous national test. These texts had also been used as benchmarks (with comments related to grade levels) in the test evaluation guidelines for teachers. The students were encouraged to discuss the results and compare their own judgments with the benchmarks, i.e. the national test experts’ assessments of the same texts. The intention behind this procedure was to help students form successively better pictures of the goals set for writing in their courses and to make the criteria that needed to be met for the various grades more concrete.

It may also be mentioned, in passing, that in the case of oral skills the groups were given samples of recordings at various grade levels and were asked to mark these according to the criteria given and also, as in the case of writing, to give reasons for the grades they gave to each recording. They were furthermore asked to self-assess their own levels in comparison with the examples provided. Eventually, they were asked to give arguments for their respective conclusions, whereupon the teacher disclosed the national expert group’s grading of the various examples as well as the motivations behind these verdicts.

Following this practice session on standards for ESL writing, students were instructed to begin producing their own texts. In conformity with the principles of process

writing, the students first discussed the assignments with their teachers. They were also encouraged to cooperate with their classmates in this introductory phase of the writing. The teacher explained the marking system that was going to be used.

Students worked on the task both in class and at home. Scripts were collected in two forms: as drafts and as final texts. Upon delivery of their first drafts for comments students were asked to fill in a self-assessment questionnaire containing items such as those in Figure 1 (in translation).

1. *Content*
- What I think I was able to express well when I wrote about the media was ...
- ...
- But I think I can improve the following:
.....

2. *Language*
- In this task I'm satisfied with my ...
 grammar spelling
 vocabulary sentence structures
 paragraphing punctuation
 Other things: ...
- But I think I may need to improve my ...
 (same options as above)

3. ...

4. I estimate that my achievement level in this assignment, so far, is grade ...
 My reasons for that are that
.....

Figure 1: Self-assessment Form 1. Sample items (Assignment: Media)

In order not to influence teachers' responses in the interviews to be conducted later in the process, the results of the student self-assessment questionnaires were kept confidential until the end of the project.

The teachers marked the draft scripts by highlighting (but not correcting) passages, phrases and words that might need to be clarified or improved, and also added brief general questions and comments to guide students in their revision of the text. This type of uncoded feedback, or indirect marking, was used in order to promote students' sense of autonomy and self-reliance in their further work on the texts. With the help of this support, the students continued working on their drafts in order to improve them to the best of their ability.

Students then revised their texts and again handed them in. The teacher read and graded the new versions, added comments to explain the reasons for the decisions regarding grades, and returned the scripts to the class.

Another brief self-assessment questionnaire was administered, this time related to the revision phase of the writing process. Some of the items included were as follows:

-
2. In relation to what is specified as goals for writing in the curriculum, I *now* think I can
.....
- But I think I need to improve
.....
3. After having revised *Media* I would *now* give myself the grade of ... for this
assignment.
- My reasons for that are that
.....

Figure 2: Self-assessment Form 2. Sample items (open-ended) (Assignment: Media)

The answers were compared to the researcher's independent evaluation of each individual student's achievement level.

Some illustrative results

The final measurement tool administered in the life of the project was the National Test of English, a high-stakes test that always correlates highly with end-of-term grades (usually in the region of $r = .85$). Immediately upon completion of the test, students were asked to predict, or pre-estimate (i.e. by self-assessment based on experience with the testing), the grades they thought they were going to get for each of four language skills that the test battery encompasses. Figure 3 shows the response form for writing.

-
1. Now that you have completed the Writing Test in English, what grade do you think you will receive?
- Fail
 - Pass
 - Pass with distinction
 - Pass with special distinction
2. How certain are you that your estimation is correct?
- Very certain
 - Certain
 - Uncertain
 - Very uncertain
3. Why do you think you will receive this grade?

Figure 3: Form for students' pre-estimation of National English Test results in writing

The association between self-assessment and the ensuing national test data was not strong, but still statistically significant. The correlation coefficients were $r = .30$ and $r = .59$ in the two major samples of students who took part in the study ($n_{tot} = 100$).

The analysis of the outcome furthermore showed that students made fairly conservative assessments of their ability. They tended to *underestimate* their results

for the different specific writing skills. Expert ratings were actually higher in many cases. But practice made a difference. Students who participated in the study for a longer time were more often on target than were students with a shorter record of participation.

This tendency for students to learn from experience showed up in the speaking data, too. The ability to make an independently verified self-assessment improved somewhat from before-the-test estimates to after-the-test estimates. Likewise, there was a slight increase in accuracy as we move from less to more experienced self-assessors (based on length of English language learning and participation in the project).

Interviews were conducted with both teachers and students. For the most part the opinion was that the combination of a writing assignment with self-assessment procedures was useful and that it increased students' awareness of their strong and weak points in the language. Some students found the task of grading sample texts relative to goals in the syllabus quite demanding but at the same time very helpful. They felt that it made the basis and criteria for grading more explicit.

On the negative side some students were a bit hesitant about the reliability of self-estimates. Uncertainty tended to be expressed in terms such as: How do I know my assessment is correct? Can I trust my intuition? Certain students who were particularly ambitious and goal-directed feared that the practice of self-assessment resulted time lost for carrying out other important learning activities. The study of new vocabulary was mentioned as one such activity.

The main lesson from this educational project is that self-assessment can work well as a supplementary source of information for the classroom teacher. It is also apparent that it strengthens the student's own role both in learning activities and in the monitoring of achievement. In combination with the technique of process writing, self-assessment was shown to enhance teacher/student cooperative evaluation. The project furthermore offers a concrete picture of some possible activities and assessment materials that can be employed for this particular kind of alternative assessment.

Example (iii)

SA as a constituent part of a language testing and language diagnosis system

Self-assessment is in point of fact best used as a means of supporting ongoing learning, rather than as a way of testing what has been learned (Council of Europe, 2001). But it can be used in testing too, and then it has more of a personal feedback function than an extrinsically relevant measurement device. The emphasis on measurement is of course what characterizes and unites the majority of classical language testing materials and procedures.

The feedback function of self-assessment may be effected both in *relative terms*, as when reference is made only to results obtained by other testees, and in *absolute terms*, as when reference is made to a standard, for instance a proficiency scale with empirically defined levels of ability. One application of self-assessment in the context of testing (in the latter perspective) is illustrated by Dialang, an on-line semi-adaptive diagnostic language testing system covering 14 European languages (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchenterprise/dialang/about>; also described in Alderson, 2005). Aspects of generalized personal judgment, concrete self-assessment, and individual decision-making are here illustrated in different ways.

To begin with, the system is explicitly designed for self-diagnosis, rather than for diagnosis made by a testing company, a certification organization, or a teacher. The assessment can be carried out from beginning to end by the “self”, i.e. the person who is primarily interested in and is affected by the diagnosis. Thus the user is in control of, for instance: which language the tests should be administered in (any one out of the 14), what is to be tested (what skill), the time at which the testing takes place (any day, around the clock), the question of whether feedback on performance should be given and also on how the test results, including the result for each individual test item, should be treated. (The most frequently chosen option in the latter case will most likely be “personal use only”).

Furthermore, a certain test function relies on assessments made by the user before the test proper is taken. These form a pre-estimation tool consisting of a number of “can-do” self-assessments (for the skills of reading, writing, and listening) which the system uses for the purpose of directing users to the most suitable level of difficulty of the test, “Easy”, “Medium” or “Difficult”. (In case the user chooses to skip the “can-dos”, the system selects a level on the basis of the results of a vocabulary size test, also administered at the beginning of the test session.) After this placement procedure, the Diagnostic test is given.

In addition to self-assessment, there are special feedback functions which are, like self-assessment, rather innovative as part of a testing system. In particular there is an opportunity for users to compare their self-assessment with their test results (both reported as CEFR² scale levels) and they have the chance to consider the import of a possible and significant discrepancy. This is likely to enhance users’ awareness of self-reflection as an interesting and constructive force in their language development, and hence also lead to a more realistic setting of goals for their own learning. Another feedback function available (explanatory feedback) indicates, for example, reasons that a given self-assessment and the corresponding test result do not match. Reasons given include, for instance, variation in the amount of exposure to the language in question and to variation in ways of using the language. There is also feedback of a proactive kind (advisory feedback), which offers suggestions on possible ways of reaching a higher CEFR level, if so desired.

² The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale system (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp). See also: Council of Europe (2011).

The challenge for the user of this Internet-delivered diagnostic foreign language test system in language education is to provide reasonably correct in-put data for the system to work efficiently to the extent intended. Unreliable self-assessment input may result in too difficult or too easy test items being presented, due to level misplacement by the system. When a misplacement occurs, the outcome (the diagnosis) may be inaccurate and the user may be given a wrong signal about his or her true ability level.

The question then is: Do test users rise to the challenge of reliable self-assessment input?

The answer seems to be in the affirmative. Research evidence at hand suggests that self-assessors, by and large, measure up to what is expected of them. In the piloting of Dialang there proved to be considerable correspondence between self-assessment and more objective test data (Alderson 2005, Chapter 8). Analysis of data derived from the piloting of self-assessment statements revealed sizable Cronbach alpha reliability figures. They were of the order of .70 - .85. Even higher reliability (above .90) was predicted for an instrument that included more items. This is an acceptable level of reliability in any educational measurement of a comparable kind.

It may also be mentioned that the use of self-assessment components in the diagnosis was quite well received by the users (*ibid.*, Chapter 14). Similar findings have been reported in other test development projects (von Elek 1985).

Example (iv)

SA as a defining characteristic of portfolio assessment

The role of self-assessment in portfolio types of documentation of learning achievement is well-established and is indeed something of a hallmark of the technique. Thus portfolio work typically involves students in the selection and storing of work samples for the purpose of their own documentation and evaluation of what they have achieved (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Students thereby appraise instances of their own work and construct a record of their development over time, either with a view to presenting their best work (in a “show-case” portfolio) or by including different drafts of their work (in a process portfolio). The physical form of a portfolio may be a folder or a box.

The methodology has been used in various contexts and forms. One example which has aroused widespread interest is the generic European Language Portfolio (ELP). At the time of writing (May 2013) the ELP exists in over a hundred registered group- and language-specific versions (Council of Europe, 2013). It uses the CEFR self-assessment grid as a holistic orientation tool and frame of reference (Council of Europe, 2001: 26-27). The grid covers five broad skill areas (Listening, Reading, Spoken interaction, Spoken production, and Writing) across the six CEFR scale levels. Each point on each scale is defined by a native language descriptor of ability in the form of a “can-do” statement.

Examples (for English):

“I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.” (Reading, Level A2)

“I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.” (Spoken production, Level A2).

The self-assessment grid is thus used to help learners communicate their perceptions of their ability and their achievements across a broad range of language skills, i.e. it is used for the purpose of global self-assessment. For more detailed self-assessments than that offered by the grid, there also exist separate comprehensive lists of “can-do” statements (SA checklists) for each of the six CEFR levels. In another component in the ELP, the Language Passport, learners can provide a differentiated picture of their self-profiled, as well as of otherwise established, language skills.

As has been made clear elsewhere (see for instance Little & Perclová, 2001) important educational benefits can be derived from self-reflective work of the kind represented by portfolios. But the use of portfolios also presents some potential drawbacks (relating to, for example, the fact that it may at times be a rather time-consuming activity and that it requires a certain measure of organizational ability and self-discipline on the part of the student). I will not, however, go into the details of the pros and cons here, but just reiterate the point that student self-assessment is at work in the creation of portfolios and that the history of its use in this way is quite respectable. It has been employed in this context from at least the 1950’s up to the present day and an important lesson to be learned, therefore, seems to be that learner-centered portfolio assessment is a proven educational technique which deserves much further attention.

Conclusion

The survey above of some fairly well-established activities in language assessment provides an illustration of the fact that traditional ways of measuring achievement are being complemented with approaches that take a wider view of language ability and its assessment. Results are basically achieved through a process of cooperation in which the language user, or language learner, is invited to take part in the establishment of what he or she is able to do, or has achieved.

Certain advantages can be derived from this. The most significant is the fact that the language user’s own perspective of his or her ability to use the language is unique and, in principle, unlimited. It can never be fully replaced by anyone else’s views or insights, no matter what professional skills that person has at his/her disposal. Only the user himself/herself has had firsthand experience of the degree of effectiveness

with which the language has functioned in his or her encounters with it – and, what is more, in all of the situations and modes of use that have existed in each personal instance. Inevitably, the external observer or examiner only has a more or less limited sample of language use to go by when attempting to determine the same person's level of ability. For example, most of students' use of the language outside school is ordinarily inaccessible to the teacher, while at the same time students often state that they learn as much of the language, particularly if it is English, outside school as in school (Oscarson & Apelgren, 2005).

The above argument indicates why there is considerable potential in self-report types of data. Judiciously used, and when possible and appropriate in combination with standard testing procedures, they may contribute to improved assessment of language ability. Dialang, the on-line language diagnosis system described above (Example iii), builds on this fundamental principle. In this system elements of self-assessment have been successfully blended with conventional test tasks.

A further aspect concerning the adoption of self-assessment is that it can help to develop learning itself (Council of Europe, 2001). Particularly as reflected in language portfolio work (c.f. Example iv above), extending over some time, oftentimes years, it can foster valuable skills reminiscent of life-long learning behavior (c.f. the Introduction above). Accustoming students to evaluating their own work more closely, self-critically and on a regular basis is believed to promote the acquisition and retention of what is being studied (Dochy et al., 1999; Rivers, 2001). When students leave something in the sphere of monitoring and evaluation of their performance to the instructor or teacher, there is a greater risk that they will learn less effectively. In this sense too self-assessment constitutes a challenge to mainstream assessment procedures, where learners' attention to the specific grounds for teachers' decisions about levels reached and grades awarded tends to be less focused.

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Endnote

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