

**THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPLEMENTING SELF-ASSESSMENT
IN ELT CLASSES
(A STUDY CONDUCTED WITH A MIXED-ABILITIES GROUP OF
PRE-INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS AT SEEU LANGUAGE CENTRE)**

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Abstract. *It is very important to implement Self-assessment in ELT classes because it helps students monitor their own learning process as well as relate their learning to their individual needs. Self-assessment can help students' realize that they are responsible for their own learning as well as trace their strengths and weaknesses, which gets them thinking about what they need to do next in order to achieve future progress in learning the target language. This article will discuss self-assessment of each student's performance and progress when implemented in mixed ability classes and the way it helps learners become more active when they are given individualized activities throughout the course. The process of self-assessment needs to start by focusing on students' individual learning from the very beginning.*

Key words: *self-assessment, self-directed learning, benefits of self-assessment, self-and teacher assessment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of self-directed language learning is the opportunity for the learners to assess their own progress. By encouraging individual reflection, self-assessment can make students see their learning in personal terms. As Chamot and O'Malley (1994:119) point out: "self-rating exercises require the student to exercise a variety of learning strategies and higher order thinking skills that not only provide feedback to the student but also provide direction for future learning". As teachers we are aware that self-directed learning is mostly needed in formal educational settings because students' are often passive learners and may become de-motivated if they don't see clear progress for learning the target language. Self-assessment can help students become more active and focused on the progress of their own learning based on their individual needs. Individual progress can be achieved through self-assessment activities. There are techniques that probe learners' proficiency, such as self-testing, self-reports, mutual peer-assessment, journal writing, answering questionnaires, and responding to "can do" statements that ask learners if they can perform certain tasks. These techniques also help learners in fulfilling the communicative objectives. In addition, and learners can realize that a prime objective is performance in the language not only knowledge. In this way, self-assessment can get students to think about how they go about learning.

Students can make teachers aware of their individual needs and should know what their abilities are, and how much progress they can or cannot make with the skills they

have acquired. It is good to know to what extent students can appraise their performance. If they have the necessary skills and if they can do the activities accurately enough, they do not have to depend completely on the opinions of the teachers.

2. ACTIVE LEARNING

John Upshur (1975, as cited in Heilenman, 1990), was one of the first who provided a rationale for the use of self-assessment in the measurement of second language abilities. He pointed out that “learners have access to the entire gamut of their success and failure in the use of the second language, whereas any test of actual language use can sample only a small proportion of that ability”. Self-assessment in line with the theories of learner autonomy is currently playing an important role in language teaching. Students judge their own learning, mainly their achievement and learning outcomes. It has been argued that teachers should help students build knowledge by assessing their own learning performance and that in that way students are responsible for building life-long learning skills.

Teachers should provide opportunities as well as train students to become more autonomous in their own learning. Hunt, Gow, and Barnes (1989) argue that without learner self-evaluation and self-assessment “there can be no real autonomy” (p. 207). Blue (1994) identifies some benefits of self-assessment such as encouraging greater effort, boosting self-confidence, and facilitating awareness of distinctions between competence and performance as well as self-awareness of learning strengths and weaknesses. Self-assessment helps students accomplish the goal of life-long learning as well as prepare them for effectiveness and improvement in their lives. The process of self-assessment is important for determining students’ patterns of strengths and weaknesses which can help them become better learners. Students develop critical attitude toward learning and attain perfect autonomy by gradually developing self-assessment skills.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

3.1. The benefits of self-assessment

Holec (1981) suggests, “autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's learning” (p.3). Furthermore, self-assessment is important because it's a tool which supports those with that ability. Autonomous learners monitor their own learning progress and take the responsibility for their own learning as well as decide what to learn, when to learn and how to learn. Moreover, they should be aware about the accuracy of their performance. That's why Self assessment helps these learners. It emphasizes learning and focuses on process rather than the results. It's an essential element of self-directed learning where learners are able to assess and monitor their own language learning. Self-assessment provides opportunity for self-study process and self-tailored assessment regime. It is a way to collect information about a person's knowledge in a language and also develops students' motivation. Students in the process of self-assessment learn about his/her individual needs, what he/she likes, doesn't like, and how he/she should react to particular situations. By monitoring the speech of others and his own speech a good language learner can realize how well his speech is received and whether his performance meets the standards he has learned.

Self-assessment can change the roles of learners and teachers. The topic of self-assessment is appealing for testing and evaluation because learners collect information about their own language learning by monitoring and evaluating their level of knowledge, performance and understanding. Therefore, self-assessment is what the students see from their own perspectives.

Learners are given opportunity to self-monitor their language learning process as well as develop meta-cognitive awareness of knowledge and thought. They take more control of their learning through reflection because self-assessment provides them with training in evaluation and helps them become more autonomous. Moreover, learners should be able to make reliable and valid judgments.

An Autonomous learner can make his/her own evaluation and in that way use a personalized assessment regime which can be problematic for institutional assessments. However, autonomous learners would definitely benefit from the feedback received on achievements they made during the learning process. The benefits of self-assessment can be extremely useful for teachers' and learners' as well as the institution (Figure 1). Learners benefit the most from self-assessment, while the benefit for the teachers and institutions depends to a large extent on whether they are able to gain access to the results of the self-assessments.

3.2. Benefits of self-assessment

Learner

- Individualization
- Reflection
- Motivation
- Evaluation TEACHER
- Monitoring
- Support
- Accreditation INSTITUTION
- Justification

3.3. Methodology

Participants

I used on-line self-assessment activities with my Basic English skills courses (pre-intermediate level). The participants were 8 male pre-intermediate level students, with mixed abilities and low English proficiency. Every second class in the week for 50 minutes students had a chance to practice on-line self-assessment exercises in a computer lab at SEEU- Skopje. Since, the self-assessment activities were used in class and posted on our class Facebook page, students could use the activities for improving their language skills or just for revision at home. Even students from previous semesters could use these self-assessment exercises for their own purposes. As a teacher I could monitor and assess the learner's ability to work independently and collaboratively as well as used the process and the results of assessment to plan supplementary learning activities for individuals and groups. Through this process of self-assessment as well as peer-assessment my students learnt to discern patterns of strengths and weaknesses that in the future can help them

become better learners. Moreover, students completed a questionnaire which proved that the activities lead to quality assurance and enhancement.

In the questionnaire, students were asked about things they liked at university and disliked: they said that they like to participate in class, interact with the teachers after class, and do exercises in computer lab.

Second, they were asked to rank what they like when it comes to individual or group work (in order of importance), and their responses averaged as follows (in order of frequency): studying alone, working in groups with the computers in class, having teacher assistance in computer lab class, listening to the teacher explain how to do the exercises in class, reading English books in class and at home, watching movies/videos in class in order to help them learn the language, or doing various worksheets in class or at home as individually assigned by the teacher.

Finally, they were asked what kind of learning activities they found difficult if any. Students found it hard to speak and concentrate in class, so self-assessment activities helped them do the assigned work at home/individually by using the computer. They have problems hearing sometimes what is said in class, have a hard time finishing the activity in class on time, and when too much noise bothers them, they can do only easy tasks in class.

The self-assessment activities were assigned to be done partly in class and at home as additional assignments for students that needed more practice. Through the process of self-assessment my students learnt to discern patterns of strengths and weaknesses that in the future can help them become better learners and lead to life-long learning. As a teacher I could assess a learner's ability to work independently and collaboratively as well as use the process and the results of assessment to plan supplementary learning activities for individuals and groups (formative assessment). I believe that self-assessment skills helped my students gradually develop a critical attitude toward learning throughout their lives, through giving feedback and achieving autonomy.

Furthermore, since most of the SEEU students come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds initial self-assessment awareness about their knowledge and skills in the target language followed by diagnostic activities can help students see that they are not starting from the same place. In order to overcome their weaknesses and become more autonomous, they need to become more focused on their own learning progress as well as accept the practical suggestions from the teacher when carrying out the self-assessment procedure.

4. SELF-ASSESSMENT AND TEACHER ASSESSMENT

Self-assessment can be an extremely useful complement to teacher assessment because it can help alleviate the assessment burden. Combining both means can make the teacher assessment more effective. Self-assessment as a formative element of assessment can help to provide continuous and personalized assessment, where the only practical measures of assessment are periodic quizzes and tests. However, during a course self-assessment can make an informal assessment go further for example, in cases where students have done personalized assessment for a writing task and talked about their problems so a teacher assessment can be done afterwards. Then students can be challenged to think and compare their assessments. In this way, a peer assessment is implemented and it's a very effective and useful tool for measuring students' achievements. In addition, students' achievements are measured because they receive corrected and marked writing feedback from both their

peers and teachers. In this way they can compare both feedbacks and realize their mistakes. In other cases students just look at the grade not realizing the importance of the corrected written work and the given feedback.

Assessment for learning is important because it helps learners become autonomous and prepare them for life-long learning. In this way assessment has a formative function and according to Scharle & Szabo (2010, p.3) autonomous learners should be able to “constantly monitor their own progress, and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit”.

Assessment for learning can be best implemented in learner-centered activities and the teacher should focus on what students are going to learn. Teachers should pay attention to learners’ different styles of learning a language. On the other hand, teachers should think about how they are going to gather data that shows how they understand and apply (grammar, vocabulary) or how well they develop a skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing). The activities should be planned carefully because teachers should elicit evidence of learning and feedback should be given either by the teacher or students themselves. In addition, learners should be involved “in their own learning not just through reflection but also as co-constructors and co-negotiators for their learning” (Spendlove, 2009, p.x).

Feedback is effective only if it helps a student achieve progress and improve his/her achievement during the process of learning. The student should not be criticized. When giving feedback it is important to tell the student what is good about his work and what needs to be improved.

In order to implement assessment for learning in *students’ self-assessment and peer-assessment* they need to be trained to self-assess and set goals for improvement. The objectives must be set up and explained in the beginning of the course. Students may use the same criteria as teachers and use the descriptors that describe their performance the best toward working on what they need to improve.

When monitoring the progress or that of their peers, they can use assessment criteria for both formative assessment (How am I doing? What can I do well? What needs to be changed? How can I improve? What do I need to work on more?) and summative assessment (they can give themselves or their peers a mark). In this way they can take an active part in the assessment, but the teacher needs to think very carefully about at which stage she/he can use students’ grades as official part of summative assessment.

Moreover, students can become resources for one another and through better understanding they can gradually become owners of their own learning and change from consumers of assessment to self-assessors. It has been reported that with regularly implemented formative assessment, learners score 70-80% higher on standardized tests (Leahy & William, 2012, p.67).

Black & William (2009, p.9) state that “practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited”. From this it follows that the decisions are not only made by the teacher, as they are in a traditional classroom, but also by learners who thus become co-creators of the learning process.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main purpose of this research was to investigate whether self-assessment activities can help students achieve better results, become more active in locating their strengths and weaknesses and help them decide what they need to accomplish next to get a better grade. In fact, the results of this study have direct and indirect implications and applications in material development, syllabus design, and test development.

Self –assessment provides training in evaluation that helps learners become more autonomous. In order to achieve balanced assessment teachers should involve the students in the assessment and evaluation process. In that way, students become partners in the learning process and at the same time become more aware of their individual needs, become more independent in their learning and gain a better sense of themselves as readers, writers, and assessors.

Self-assessment is one of the pillars of learner autonomy that gives learners the opportunity to monitor and assess their own progress. According to Lee (1998, p.282), “It is important to help students become aware of the value of independent learning outside the classroom, so that they acquire the habit of learning continuously, and maintain it after they have completed their formal studies”.

Utilizing self-assessment techniques can improve all their language skills as shown by this research. The self-assessment questionnaire helped me to become familiar with the students’ capabilities, deficiencies, and needs. In light of the positive effect of self-assessment on writing skills found in this study, methods of teaching and material development in language classes should be designed in such a way that encourages self-assessment techniques and consequently affects learners’ skills. Thus, it can be concluded that self-assessment techniques help the students improve all their language skills. Finally, the researcher hopes the present study will be useful to those involved in the area of language teaching to help students develop techniques for their own learning.

6. STUDENTS’ SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Summary of results

Three things that you liked and disliked about school in the past: Liked: the teacher good atmosphere lessons, school, people, exercises done in class, Disliked: we don’t have sports hall. What is the main reason for attending this class? What do you hope to accomplish? Improve my English and get skills for work, participate in class and learn new things, do exercises in a computer lab, interact with teachers after the class, meet new friends get final grade 6, find job easily, want to improve English and strengthen their communication skills.

For each description of how you learn check if you like it, it’s ok, or dislike it.

Question	Count
working with my hands	4
studying alone	3
working with another person	2
working in a group of students	4
figuring out what to do by myself	1
listening to someone explain how to do something	3

Question	Count	
someone show me how to do something	3	
reading to myself	2	
Hearing someone else tell me	0	
watching a movie or video to learn	4	
using programs on the computer	2	
doing worksheets	1	
Other	0	
working with my hands	4	50%
studying alone	3	37.5%
working with another person	2	25%
working in a group of students	4	50%
figuring out what to do by myself	1	12.5%
listening to someone explain how to do something	3	37.5%
someone show me how to do something	3	37.5%
reading to myself	2	25%
hearing someone else tell me	0	0%
watching a movie or video to learn	4	50%
using programs on the computer	2	25%
doing worksheets	1	12.5%
Other	0	0%

What kind of learning activities do you find difficult if any?

Question	Count	
It's hard for me to speak in class	4	
it's hard for me to understand what people are saying in English	0	
I have trouble hearing sometimes	2	
It's hard to work by myself	2	
It's hard for me to work in a group	3	
I get distracted easily	0	
I have problem finishing the activity in class on time	1	
Too much noise bothers me	2	
I can only do easy tasks	1	
I can easily manage problem-based tasks	2	
I can hardly concentrate in class	5	
Other	0	
It's hard for me to speak in class	4	50%
it's hard for me to understand what people are saying in English	0	0%
I have trouble listening and understanding (processing) sometimes	2	25%
It's hard to work by myself	2	25%
It's hard for me to work in a group	3	37.5%
I get distracted easily	0	0%
I have problem finishing the activity in class on time	1	12.5%
Too much noise bothers me	2	25%
I can only do easy tasks	1	12.5%
I can easily manage problem-based tasks	2	25%
I can hardly concentrate in class	5	62.5%

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