

Developing Self-Assessment to Promote Autonomous Learning

Salah Derradji, University of El-tarf

Abstract

Investigations and research have shown that in very recent years, there has been a growing interest in the application of testing procedures that are totally different from traditional forms of assessment. More authentic forms of measurement have become increasingly popular in the foreign language classes. These forms of assessment are more student centred in that, in addition to being an assessment tool, they provide the students with a tool to be more involved in their process of learning, and give them a better sense of control of their own achievement. This paper, we will show how (self-assessment) can allow time for the student to further develop as an effective learner, over time, gaining proficiency in the range of learning skills most appropriate to his / her own context. It is true that many students may not at first feel comfortable with self-evaluation, thinking that it is the job of the teacher to evaluate. However, it is our strong belief that students cannot grow as active learners if they are not able to assess their own abilities and progress and set a path for future learning. Students need to be taught the strategy of self-assessment explicitly and to be supported in their use of the strategy. The greatest value of self- assessment is that, in building it, students become active participants in the learning process and its assessment. We also believe that promoting this new vision to assessment will hopefully engender a dynamic pedagogy where the students are actors of their training and the educational team is a support, a guide and adviser which accompany them all along their academic training.

ملخص

تشير التحقيقات والبحوث في السنوات الأخيرة إلى أن هناك اهتماما متزايدا في تطبيق أساليب الاختبار التي تختلف كليا عن أشكال التقييم التقليدية. لقد أصبحت بعض أنماط القياس الأصلية أكثر شعبية في أقسام تعليم اللغة الأجنبية. كما أصبحت هذه الأنماط أكثر تمحورا حول المتعلم حيث أنها صارت، بالإضافة إلى كونها أداة تقييم، توفر للطلاب وسيلة للمشاركة في عملية التعلم الخاصة بهم، وتمنحهم شعورا أفضل بالتحكم في إنجازاتهم. سوف نبين في هذا البحث كيف يمكن للتقييم الذاتي أن يمنح الوقت للطلاب لمواصلة التعلم بفعالية، مع مرور الوقت، واكتساب الكفاءة في مجموعة من مهارات التعلم الأنسب له/لها. صحيح أن العديد من الطلاب قد لا يشعر بالراحة في البداية مع التقييم الذاتي، معتبرا إياها مهمة الأستاذ. ومع ذلك، فإننا نؤمن بعدم قدرة الطلاب على النمو كمتعلمين فاعلين إذا ما كانوا غير قادرين على تقييم قدراتهم وتقديمهم، وتحديد مسار تعلمهم المستقبلي. إن الطلبة بحاجة إلى أن يدرسوا إستراتيجية للتقييم الذاتي مباشرة وأن يتم تشجيعهم على استخدامها. أعظم قيمة للتقييم الذاتي هو أنه أثناء بنائه يصبح الطلاب مشاركين فاعلين في عملية التعلم وتقييمها. ونعتقد أيضا بأن تعزيز هذه الرؤية الجديدة للتقييم ستولد بيداغوجيا فعّالة حيث يتحكم الطلاب بتدريبيهم ويكون الفريق التعليمي دعماً ، ودليلاً ومستشاراً يرافقهم طول تدريبيهم الأكاديمي.

1- Introduction

Investigations and research have shown that in very recent years, there has been a growing interest in the application of testing procedures that are totally different from traditional forms of assessment. More authentic forms of measurement have become increasingly popular in the foreign language classes. These forms of assessment are more student centred in that, in addition to being an assessment tool, they provide the students with a tool to be more involved in their process of learning, and give them a better sense of control of their own achievement. In this paper, we will show how **(self assessment)** can allow time for the student to further develop as an effective learner, over time, gaining proficiency in the range of learning skills most appropriate to his / her own context.

It is true that many students may not at first feel comfortable with self-evaluation, thinking that it is the job of the teacher to evaluate. However, it is our strong belief that students cannot grow as active learners if they are not able to assess their own abilities and progress and set a path for future learning. Students need to be taught the strategy of self-assessment explicitly and to be supported in their use of the strategy. The greatest value of self- assessment is that, in building it, students become active participants in the learning process and its assessment.

We also believe that promoting this new vision to assessment will hopefully engender a dynamic pedagogy where the students are actors of their training and the educational team is a support, a guide and adviser which come with them all along their academic training. When students are asked to rate their current abilities or their peers- home or classroom work, the academic team (tutors) will be prepared to suggest and provide them with the tools and criteria with which they will assess themselves.

2-Research in Self-Assessment

Research findings in the area of self-assessment (Oskarsson 1984 for a review) seem to point to a fairly consistent correlation between self-assessment and other forms of external (i.e., from outside the classroom or school) measures or teachers' assessment. Most of the studies reported in the literature have involved adult students in the context of university courses. These studies are marked by the specificity of the situation in which they are embedded by the aims or views of each researcher. A look at some of these studies might, however, give us an indication as to the possible applications of self-assessment in the context of foreign language teaching to our learners at university level.

Oskarsson: The most extensive work in the area of self assessment is probably that of Oskarsson, from the University of Göteborg, in Sweden (Oskarsson 1978, 1984, 1989). He conducted a pioneering study for the Council of Europe, published in 1978, in which possible forms of self-assessment were discussed and related research projects were described.

Oskarsson's first review of the literature (in the late 70's) revealed that self- assessment was being conducted mainly through the use of discrete-point tests of vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension. Very little was done in relation to assessment of oral skills or the use of other instrument of oral skills or in relation to the use of other instruments for self-assessment – like questionnaires or peer assessment of simulated real- life situations.

Field experiments of the ideas proposed then generally showed high correlation between self-assessment and external tests. These studies also confirmed an expected need for learner training in relation to assessment.

Bachman and Palmer (1981) - In this study, the authors used self-assessment as part of a multitrait- multimethod investigation into the construct validity of tests of speaking and reading. The purpose of the investigation was to find out whether speaking and reading abilities are independently measurable, i.e., whether they are in fact separate constructs.

Their self-assessment instrument consisted of written questionnaires in the subjects' mother tongue (Mandarin Chinese). The questions tried to elicit subjects' perceptions of their general language ability as well as their control of linguistic forms, for example:

Q. "How hard is it for you to use different kinds of English with different kinds of people?"

A. "Impossible/ Very hard/ Not very hard/ Very easy."

Q. "How many different kinds of pronunciation mistakes do you make in English? "

A. "I make pronunciation mistakes in almost everything/ many kinds/ only a few kinds/ I almost never make pronunciation mistakes."

The results obtained from the questionnaires were correlated with the results of an oral interview and an oral translation method (considered

by the researchers to be the best measures of speaking and reading skills, respectively). Bachman and Palmer found that the reliability measures were as high as .85-.96 for the self-assessment method. Substantial intercorrelations between self-rating and the other two methods were obtained, with coefficients ranging from .51 to .74.

LeBlanc and Painchaud (1985): This study used self-assessment for the purpose of placement. It was conducted at the University of Ottawa where new students have to be assessed in their proficiency of either English or French as a second language.

Questionnaires covering general ability in the four skills-with questions similar to those used by Bachman and Palmer were administered and correlated with proficiency tests of the same skills. Results showed not only that there were high correlations between the different measures, but also that after some time the percentage of changes from initial placement was very low. Self-assessment questionnaires were also found to be much easier and quicker to administer than conventional tests.

Von Eiek (1985): The test developed by Von Eiek, from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, is one of the most important ones in the area. It is an instrument devised for self-diagnostic purposes to be used by adult migrants studying Swedish as a second language.

The test battery consists of 1,500 items covering six areas: the four skills plus grammar and vocabulary. The questions are all formulated in the target language, and the student has a three choice answer form with the options: "yes, absolutely"; "I think so"; or "no". Examples of questions are:

- "Vocabulary": Do you know the meaning of the underlined word below?

- Listening: Do you know which picture the speaker is referring to? "

For each of the six areas, there are 25 questions, each one providing 10 sub- questions of different degrees of difficulty. The results of such a questionnaire provide learners with a self-rated profile that can be used for diagnostic purposes and some sort of measurement of level of proficiency in the various areas covered.

Eurocentre Bournemouth (in Holec 1988; Oskarsson 1984) the work done at the Eurocentre language school in Bournemouth has been directed at continuous self-assessment of classroom activities as a means to improving the learning process.

Different ways of self-assessment have been used, such as laboratory follow-up to oral practice lessons, with recording of students' interactions being commented on by the teacher, after which a new recording is made and compared by the students with the previous version of progress videos in which students are video taped doing short role-plays at regular intervals (in Holec 1980). Towards the end of the term the students are shown the films and asked to evaluate their performance on the basis of a form

covering the areas of fluency, pronunciation, grammar and general impression.

These approaches are reported by participants as being highly valuable in promoting learner motivation and autonomy. There is also, according to them, a usually good index of agreement between learners and teachers ratings.

3-Aspects of Self-Assessment

Implementing a self-assessment project will certainly require the allocation of a good deal of time in any course programme. Familiarising students with the idea of self-assessment and training them to do so is not something one can do with a five minutes chat at the end of a class session.

Even considering that one of the aims of self- directed learning is to enable learners to work on their own outside the classroom hours, one still has to devote some of the class time to promote this independence. We believe that planning a self-assessment project should include considerations about the syllabus to be covered within a certain period of time. Self - directed learning which is included in the new reforms of higher education (within LMD system) should lead to more effective and faster learning, in the long run. However, we realize that such a project is extremely time consuming and would probably require the reduction of the input load in terms of the contents of a given syllabus.

3.1-Responsibility

The term "responsibility", when applied to the teaching/ learning situation, can be a tricky one. On the one hand, it is desirable to engage learners actively in the educational process, so that whatever is taught can be learnt, or so that "input" can more easily become "intake". In this sense, we suppose we could use the term responsibility to refer to the learners' share in the process of education. This does not imply that teachers or institutions lose their own share in conducting the process although a learner- centred orientation in education, as Allwright points out (1984) does imply abdication of responsibility.

This view, however, may not be very clear to students, especially if their previous educational experiences have been marked by conservative practices in which the roles of teachers and learners are very distinctly defined. These learners might resent being given the task (the chance?) of self- assessment. Imposing it on such a group would then be far from the objectives which self-evaluation seeks to promote.

This possibility of some resistance on the part of students in relation to self-assessment has to do with the power with which institutions and teachers are invested in relation to deciding what is supposedly best for students. Self- assessment will only represent an innovation in educational terms if it is a way to empower learners to make decisions about themselves. Otherwise, it will be just another gimmick to fill the pages of teachers' manuals.

3.2-Learner Training

The aspect of learner training seems to us to relate to three areas.

- Firstly, it has to do with acquainting learners with the concept of self-assessment, i.e., what it entails, what it seeks to promote and how it is conducted.

- Secondly, it relates to study skills and to developing learners' awareness in relation to the language being learnt, the materials and methods being used, in short, the whole teaching process.

- Thirdly, learner training in self-assessment has to do with specific guidelines for evaluation. This again is very much a matter of judging the extent to which it is desirable to train learners in the use of a set of criteria defined by the teacher or some other authority, or whether it is individualization that one is trying to encourage. For example, if a group of learners are trained to monitor their oral performance with a view to improving fluency, group activities are audio-taped and analysed, and students work together to make comments and suggestions to each other. What happens, however, if one or more students in the group are particularly interested in perfecting their pronunciations of individual words or sounds? This seems to be a case in which the teacher would have to direct these learners to specific work in the area of pronunciation, and try to point out to them the aims of the fluency activities. In other words, the criteria being used for assessment would have to be very clear to students. At the same time, the possibility of developing in different directions should be open to learners.

3.3- Innovation in Self-Assessment?

In view of the application of self-assessment as an innovative measure in the context of first year EFL learners in our university, it is necessary to analyse first what is meant by innovation.

In an article entitled "Innovation in language Testing", Alderson (1986) discusses the accountability of innovating. He suggests a number of questions which 'innovators' should ask themselves, some of which we are going to use here to refer to the particular context of the introduction of self-assessment procedures.

1-"Are the changes that are claimed to be innovations actually new? In other words, do the self-assessment instruments used really promote learner awareness, development and responsibility for their learning process? Or are they the sort of tests which learners mark according to a key provided by the teacher and from which they get little but an overall score?

2-Do the innovations, be the old or new actually work? If they work, do they work better than what they replace? The answer to this question implies, in the first place, the need for empirical observation. However, the question is not simply one of whether self-assessment works "better" than external exams in terms of measuring achievement or predicting performance. Because self-assessment is concerned with degree of

motivation as well as with improving performance, evaluating the innovation becomes more difficult. This brings us to another of Alderson's questions.

3- "Might there be a need for innovation even if what is being replaced does work?" The answer seems to point to a "Yes!" if existing practices fulfil technical or institutional requirements but not the demands of educational objectives. In relation to testing, this might be the case if formal tests albeit being good measures of progress or achievement do not help to promote learner independence and involvement.

4- "Why do innovations come about? Who demands and causes them, and on what basis?" This has already been touched upon, in relation to the question of responsibility in evaluating learners' performance. This list of potential aspects to be considered is far from being a definitive one, given the complex nature of education and human relationships. It does certainly reflect, however, our own concerns and prejudices as well as aspects mentioned by different authors.

Alderson (1986:105) concludes his article entitled "Innovations in Language Testing?" "by saying that" perhaps we should be looking for and fostering, not only innovations in language testing, but also and importantly, innovations through language testing." This was the line which this paper tried to follow, starting from the premise that evaluation should not be seen as a necessary evil but as an intrinsic, constructive element of the teaching/ learning process.

4-Reservations as to the Use of Self Assessment: The Problem of Bias

When confronted with the question of whether students would be capable and therefore allowed to do self-evaluation, we believe most people - including a good number of teachers- would agree with Dickinson (1987:61) when he says that it is probably inevitable that most learners assessing themselves will be biased in their own favour, which will result in a certain distortion of test results.

This proposition, although plausible, does not seem to be always true, judging from Oskarsson's (1984: 32) report. According to him:

in at least four of the studies examined in detail the researchers found that the most proficient students tended to underestimate their ability and skill. Reported cases of overestimation tended to involve weak students to a greater extent than good ones.

Similar findings have been reported by McLeod (1983), who claims that good students tend to underestimate themselves because their awareness of language or high-level objectives give them the notion of what remains to be learned. Students who have experienced difficulties, on the other hand, tend to overestimate their ability since they cannot perceive a need for improvement. Underestimation of one's abilities may also indicate that students simply do not know or are not aware of what they can actually

“do” with the target language. This is especially true of foreign language teaching in contexts where the target language is not commonly used outside the classroom, as it happens in our country.

When talking about bias in self- assessment, it is also important to distinguish, as Dickinson (1987:90) points out, between “the natural tendency of learners to interpret doubtful or ambiguous results in their own favour, and the deliberate falsification of results”, or cheating. Dickinson goes on to add that cheating can only happen where there is a concern with showing results to someone else, in other words, if one is concentrating on products of instruction and on test scores.

Conclusion

The reader may notice that special attention is paid to the possible uses of self- assessment, not only as an alternative to formal tests but basically and above all as a tool for learner independence. Possible problems inherent to the nature of self- evaluation were outlined, as well as anticipated problems related to the resources required for the implementation of such innovation for example, timing and training of staff and students.

Teachers can succeed to apply and adopt the discussed technique in the classroom by advocating authenticity of materials, relevance of situations in which speaking is an appropriate activity, cultural sensitivity, and other factors; they can make the learning environment as conducive to expression and language acquisition as possible.

Bibliography

- Alderson, J.C. (1986). “Innovations in Language Testing?” in portal, M. (ed)
- Allwright, D. 1984. ‘Why don't learners learn what teachers teach? - the interaction hypothesis’, in Singleton, D.M. & D.G. Little.
- Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental Consideration in Language Testing*, Oxford University Press.
- Bachman, L. and A.S. Palmer. (1981). “A multitrait-multimethod investigation into the construct validity of six tests of speaking and reading” in palmer, A.S et al. (eds)
- Bachman, L. and A.S. Palmer (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford:
- Brown, J. D., & Hudson, T. (2002). *Criterion-referenced language testing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, S. Rust, C., Gibbs, G., (1994). *Strategies for Diversifying Assessment in Higher Education*, Oxford, Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
- Carroll, B. J., & Hall, P. J. (1985). *Make your own language tests: A practical guide to writing language performance tests*. Oxford: Pergamon Press
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in Language Learning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Ellis, G & B. Sinclair (1989) *Learning to Learn English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Henning, G. (1987). *A guide to language testing*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Holec, H. (1980). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Holec, H. (1988). *Autonomy and self-directed learning: present fields of application* Strasbourg Council of Europe.
- LeBlanc, R. G. Painchaud (1985). "Self-Assessment as a second language placement instrument" in *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 19 n° 4 Dec. 1985.
- Madsen, H. S. (1983). *Techniques in testing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McLeod, N. (1983). *Some techniques for involving learners in their own evaluation*, unpublished notes, British Council Language Teaching Centre, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- Morrow, K. (1979). "Communicative language Testing: revolution or evolution, In Brumfit, C. J. & K. Johnson (eds) *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Malley, J. M., and Valdez Pierce, L. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners: Practical approaches for teachers*. New York: Addison Wesley.
- Oskarsson, M. (1978). *Approaches to Self-assessment in Foreign Language Learning*, Council of Europe, Oxford: Pergamon Institute of English
- Oskarsson, M. (1981). *Subjective and Objective Assessment of Foreign Language Performance*, in Read (ed) 225-239.
- Oskarsson, M. (1984). *Self Assessment of Foreign Language Skills: A survey of research and development work*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe
- Oskarsson, M. (1989). "Self-assessment of language proficiency: rationale and applications", in *Language Testing*, vol. 6 no1 June 1989 London: Edward Arnold. Oxford University Press.
- Read, JAS. (ed)(1981a). *Directions in language testing SEAMEO regional centre anthology series 9*
- Revel, J. (1979). *Teaching Techniques for Communicative English*. Macmillan
- Smith, K. (1989). *Self-evaluation in the Foreign Language Classroom*, paper presented at the 23rd IATEFL Conference, Warwick
- Spolsky, b.(ed) (1976). *Language testing: art or science paper read at the 4th international congress of applied linguistics*. Stuttgart: hochschulverlag, Germany.
- Von Elek, T. (1985). "A test of Swedish as a second-Language: an experiment in Self-assessment", in Lee, Y.P. et. Al. (eds).
- Weir, C. J. (1995). *Understanding & developing language tests*. New York: Phoenix ELT.