Using Self-assessment as an Innovative Practice to Promote Self-directed Language Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

The overall aim of higher education is to equip learners with skills and practices that enable lifelong learning and independent problem solving. Contemporary approaches emphasize the active engagement of students in their own learning, student's responsibility and cognitive skills. Self-assessment has become a means of realizing the goals of learner-centred education. It is conducted in order to help students become self-directed learners through engaging them in their learning and making them aware of their weaknesses. With regard to this point, this paper reports results of a classroom activity practiced in a written course at the department of English at Batna University. Our aim was to show how effective the use of self-assessment was in developing students' self-directed learning. To achieve this goal, we designed a writing rubric with 5 categories of performance that 31 first year students used to assess their own paragraphs. After having practiced this activity for a semester, the findings revealed a significant development not only in students' writing, but mainly in their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses; students' self-assessment also enhanced their critical thinking and developed their meta-cognitive skills.

Key words: self-directed learning; self-assessment.

ملخص:

إن الهدف الأساسي للتعليم العالي هو تزويد الطلبة بالمهارات والممارسات الضرورية التي تمكنهم من التعلم مدى الحياة. تؤكد النظريات المعاصرة على المشاركة النشطة للطلاب في تعلمهم، مسؤولياتهم كطلبة إضافة إلى أهمية مهاراتهم المعرفية. أصبح التقييم الذاتي وسيلة لتحقيق أهداف التعليم الذي يركز على المتعلم فهو يساعد الطلاب على أن يصبحوا متعلمين ذاتيا من خلال مشاركتهم في تعلمهم ووعيهم بنقاط ضعفهم. يقدم هذا المقال تقريرا عن نتائج تجربة التقييم الذاتي لطلبة سنة أولى لغة انجليزية بجامعة باتنة. كان هدفنا هو إظهار مدى فعالية استخدام التقييم الذاتي في تطوير التعلم الذاتي للطلاب. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، قمنا بتصميم جدول يضم 5 فئات من الأداء، استعمله 31 طالبا في السنة الأولى لتقييم فقراتهم الخاصة. بعد ممارسة هذا النشاط لفصل دراسي كامل، كشفت النتائج عن تطور كبير ليس فقط في كتابة الطلاب، ولكن أيضا في وعيهم بنقاط القوة ونقاط الضعف لديهم. وعززت تفكيرهم النقدي وتطوير مهاراتهم المعرفية.

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

Alvin Toffler

Introduction

Education is no longer a practice that happens to a student, but one that happens with a student[1]. In recent years, international education philosophies have become increasingly concerned about how to prepare learners for a world we cannot even predict, and how to equip them with skills and practices that enable lifelong learning and independent problem-solving. The focus of instruction in recent educational systems has been shifted from the teacher to the student; as a result, responsibility for learning is now put in the hands of students; they choose what they learn, how they will learn, and how they will assess their own learning[2]. This self-directed learning is nothing new; it emerged during the ancient Greek period, was temporarily forgotten, and then reappeared in our age. According to Goodman and Lesnik[3], the revival and the widespread of self directed learning is due to many factors, namely, the influence of democracy as a system, the philosophy of critical thinking and globalization.

From some discussions raised in the teachers meeting sessions in the Department of English at Batna University in Algeria, it was discussed that problems in learning English are not simply because of students' low comprehension and poor performance, but may be largely caused by the students' lack of understanding and practice of their self-directed learning. It is teachers that tell students what to do and learners just listen and obey. This passive role in learning would, certainly,

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[1] **Grant, P and D Basye**. Personalized learning: A guide for engaging students with technology. n.p.: International Society for Technology in Education, 2014.

[2] **Hannafin, M J. and K M. Hannafin**. Cognition and student-centered, web-based learning: Issues and implications for research and theory. n.p.: In Learning and instruction in the digital age (pp. 11-23). Springer US, 2010.

[3] **Goodman, J F. and H Lesnick**. The Moral Stake in Education: Contested Premises and Practices. n.p.: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1185 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036, 2001.

inhibit most students from learning English efficiently. To help them become self-directed learners, researchers and teachers have made numerous efforts in reforming English language teaching and learning. Some of them tried to redesign the curriculum and assessment system, such as, Judy and Crookall[4] who introduced new classroom activities and determined new role to the teacher as a facilitator rather than an authority. Other researchers; e.g., Littlewood choose to train students to be active and autonomous learners through encouraging them to set their own learning goals, seek their learning materials and cooperate with others.

In this paper, we aim to re-emphasize the significance of higher education learners' self-directed learning through encouraging them to socialize their learning, observe and participate in new experiences, incorporating new knowledge into existing knowledge and modifying the latter if necessary[5]. The paper will also explore self-assessment as an important element in promoting self-directed learning. The results of an innovative assessment practice at the department of English at Batna University will be used to illustrate first year students of English attitudes towards self-assessment.

Self-directed Learning: A key component of adult learning theory

Self-directed learning is a notion that has a variety of interpretations and applications in the adult educational field. At first glance, it could be interpreted as independent learning, solitary learning, or teacher-less learning. Knowles[6] popularised a common definition for self-directed learning; he describes it as "a process in which individuals take the initiative with or without the help of other[s], to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning

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[4] **Ho, J and D Crookall**. Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: Learner autonomy in English language teaching. n.p.: System, 23(2), 235-243, 1995.

[5] **Council of Europe**, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2001

[6] **Knowles**, **MS**. The modern practice of adult education: from pedagogy to andragogy (Rev. and Updated Ed.). Wilton, Conn. Chicago: Association Press; Follet Pub. Co, 1980.

strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes". In his definition, which is still the most quoted one in the academic literature; Knowles asserts that learners can be empowered to take more responsibility for various decisions associated with their learning. Knowles views learners as responsible owners and managers of their own learning process, they have to move from "being dependent personalities towards being... self-directed"[7]. According to Knowles, self-directed learning is a completely different process than 'normal' process where a teacher, professor, mentor, etc., stands in front of learners and delivers the content of the material, then learners, as a sponge, are expected to absorb the material through listening and taking notes.

Knowles used his definition to focus on his primary area of interest; that is *andragogy*, or adult learning; however, some researchers used his ideas for younger learners; and others argued that his approach is better suited for gifted and talented learners. For decades, and even today, it is argued that younger learners are neither capable nor developmentally ready for what Knowles describes in his definition[8]. Knowles states that adults are internally motivated to learn, they register for a course because they want to be challenged; whereas a young learner may go to a class only because his parents asked him to do so. Furthermore, as youth, developmental tasks have not reached their highest potential yet, in adulthood, these same developmental tasks have matured over time, therefore the timing of the learning activities will be different. Knowles adds that since with age in education, comes experience "adults come to an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths". We conclude by saying that Knowles's definition is certainly not focused on small elite group of people, nor is it suitable for young learners. It was a concept applied to a broad set of adult learners ranging from formal higher education to continuing and community education.

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[7] **Knowles, MS.** The modern practice of adult education: from pedagogy to andragogy (Rev. and Updated Ed.). Wilton, Conn. Chicago: Association Press; Follet Pub. Co, 1980.

[8] **Knowles, MS**. The adult learner: the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development (6th ed.). Amsterdam ; Boston: Elsevier, 2005.

If learners are self-directed, then do they need a teacher?

If we look at Knowles's definition, we can see that self-directed learning does not necessarily mean that teachers are superfluous, and hence all the learning will take place in isolation from others; instead learning can be highly interdependent, collaborative or cooperative[9]. Self-directed learning does not devaluate the role of the teacher, it just calls him to adopt new roles as facilitator, guide, resource 'agent' or enabling 'agent'. Teachers have to make learning 'visible' through modeling learning strategies and working with learners so that they develop the ability to use them on their own[10].

What are the benefits of self-directed learning?

The benefits of self-directed learning are best described in terms of the type of learners it develops. Individuals, who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better than those who sit waiting for the teacher to teach them[11]. Self-directed learners are curious and willing to try new things[12]; they view problems as challenges, desire change, and enjoy learning[13]. Gibbons believes that self-directed learning leads to an "… increase in knowledge, skill, accomplishment or personal development that an individual selects and brings about by his or her own efforts, using any method, in any circumstances, at any time"[14]; therefore, the learner is no more a recipient, but he becomes an agent who is able to develop his own rules

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[9] **Guthrie, J T., S Alao and J M. Rinehart**. Literacy issues in focus: Engagement in reading for young adolescents. n.p.: Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 40(6), 438-446, 1997.

[10] **Corno, L**. Encouraging students to take responsibility for learning and performance. n.p.: The Elementary School Journal, 93(1), 69-83, 1992.

[11] **Abdullah, M H**.. "Self-Directed Learning." (2001):

[12] ibid

[13] **Garrison, D R**.. "Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model." Adult education quarterly 48 (1997): 18-33.

[14] **Clifford, B R. and R Bull**. "The psychology of person identification (Vol." (2007):

and leadership patterns. Finally, self-directed learning is viewed simultaneously as a means and an end of lifelong education[15].

What can teachers and educators do to best support learners develop their self-directed learning?

As educators, one of our fundamental and universal duties is to prepare our students for the future. If we do not prepare them to be self-directed, lifelong learners, we are doing them a grave disservice[16]. Therefore, our task, as teachers, is to use appropriate strategies that can help learners develop their skills and attitudes in formal learning settings. Since the beginning of the millennium year, there have been numerous studies and publications that suggest new approaches and programmes to develop self-directed learning in different levels of foreign language education, at different schools and different universities[17]. One of the main strategies that aim at involving students to develop their own responsibility towards their learning progress is self-assessment. In this paper, we present some findings of a classroom activity intended to find out to what extent a self-assessment practice could foster first year students' self-directed learning. The study was conducted at the department of English at Batna University, Algeria during the academic year 2014-2015.

Self-assessment

Higher education has generally focused on "acquisition of" rather than "participation in" learning[18]. Our students often listen and watch in class; however "doing" is what we want them to engage in and

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[15] **Candy, P C..** "Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning." A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice. Jossey-Bass 350 (1991): 94104-1310.

[16] **Guglielmino, L M..** "Development of the self-directed learning readiness scale." (1978).

[17] **Kijisklu, M N..** "Attitudes of English Preparatory School Students' towards Using Technology at the Students' Self Study Centers (Doctoral dissertation, Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU))." (2011).

[18] **Boud, D and N Falchikov**. "Aligning assessment with long-term learning." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 31 (2006): 399-413.

excel at. Self-assessment is defined as "the involvement of learners in making judgements about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning"[19] and "identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards"[20]. Thus, self- assessment is intimately bound up with issues of power, control and authority and the extent to which these are transferred from academic staff to students[21]. Self-assessment is a valuable approach to supporting student learning, particularly when used formatively. It is also useful in preparing students for lifelong learning, through discussions about their skills and competencies (including the ability to assess), not just knowledge[22]. In the same vein, O'Malley and Valdez[23] emphasize that self-assessment practice not only promotes students' critical thinking towards their performance but also encourages them to look for solutions to the constraints encountered.

According to Taras[24], there are three different purposes of self-assessment:

1. To demonstrate the achievement of outcomes and goals;
2. To evaluate the understanding of the content;
3. And to achieve personal development of the learner.

Boud and Falchikov claim that before implementing any self-assessment approach in teaching, it is important to discuss the issue with students in order to promote understanding, negotiate and decide upon the assessment criteria, also to highlight the required standards and learning outcomes.

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[19] **Boud, D and N Falchikov**. "Aligning assessment with long-term learning." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 31 (2006): 399-413

[20] **Boud, D**. "Assessment and learning: contradictory or complementary." Assessment for learning in higher education (1995):

[21] **Brew, A**. "Research and teaching: Changing relationships in a changing context." Studies in higher education 24 (1999): 291-301.

[22] ibid

[23] **O'malley, J M. and L V. Pierce**. "Authentic assessment for English language learners: Practical approaches for teachers." (1996):

[24] **Taras, M.** "Student self-assessment: Processes and consequences." Teaching in Higher Education 15 (2010): 199-209.

During the academic year 2014-2015, we were in charge of the module of written expression for first year students of English; our students often complain: "writing is difficult and stressful", "I do not deserve this grade", "my ideas in the paragraph are sufficient", "my vocabulary is wide enough."... and the list of complaints goes on. What should we do? To enable our students assume responsibility for their own learning, and to help them acquire the skills of analysis and critical thinking, we decided to integrate self-assessment practice in the module of written expression. Our primary purpose was to document students' attitudes towards self-assessment and to record changes in their writing performance; furthermore, self- assessment can contribute towards student perceptions of the fairness of assessment[25].

Procedure

During the second semester of the academic year 2014 -2015, the 31 first year students of English were given written tasks on different types of paragraphs (narrative, descriptive and persuasive), after we had discussed with students the meaning of self- assessment and explained the purpose of using it for their written tasks, together, we negotiated and decided upon the assessment criteria; we designed a writing rubric with 5 criteria (*topic sentence/main idea*, *supporting sentences*, *concluding sentence*, *fluency/organisation*, *mechanics/ word choice/ presentation*) (see appendix A). For each criterion in the rubric four levels of quality are described (*Beginner, Basic, Intermediate and Advanced)*. Using instructional rubrics help students "understand what is wanted on an assignment, help students understand what a quality...product looks like, [and] enable students to self assess"[26]. In each session of written expression, students were asked to write a paragraph of about 10 lines on a given topic and within 30 minutes. After handing in their drafts, we started assessing them. In the next session, students got back their drafts and the writing (scoring) rubric.

[25] **Rust, C and M Price**. "Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 28 (2003): 147-164.
[26] **Arter, J and J Chappuis**. "Creating and recognizing quality rubrics." Upper Saddle River (2007).

With the help of the rubric, students were asked to read their own drafts carefully, assign scores on each feature of the rubric and give total score. Once the students finished their assessment, we showed our assessment and offered explanation. The students compared their scores with those of the teacher and then discussed the divergence in their assessments with the teacher. Adjustments were made and final agreement was reached. In the final week, the quality of the last paragraph (the last task) was assessed by the author in order to see if differences in quality are related to the use of the self-assessment tool.

At the end of the second semester, we used a semi-structured interview with 4 open ended questions based on the topic under investigation in order to know about students' perceptions and attitudes towards the effect of self assessment technique (see appendix B) on their learning.

Results

A comparison between scores obtained from students' self-assessment and those of teacher assessment was made twice; one of the first task (1st week) and the second of the last task (7th week). The following table presents the results.

n=31	1st draft (1st week)		last draft (7th week)	
	Self assessment mean	Teacher's assessment mean	Self assessment mean	Teacher's assessment mean
Topic sentence	3.67	1.98	2.89	2.14
Supporting sentences	3.14	2.58	3.65	3.09
Concluding sentence	2.96	2.04	3.25	3.14
Fluency	3.04	1.92	3.69	1.98
Mechanics	3.94	1.05	3.67	2.08
Total	**16.75**	**9.57**	**17.15**	**12.43**

As can be seen from the table above, there is a significant difference between students' self-assessment and teacher assessment on the total score of draft 1; students over assessed themselves. However, a comparison between students' self-assessment and teacher assessment of the last draft shows that there is a kind of agreement between both of them on the grades of the first 3 criteria (topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence); i.e., students can generally distinguish a paragraph of good content from one of poor content and one of logical structure from one of disconnected structure. This agreement indicates that students involved in this practice (self- assessment) have become able to make judgments about their general performance in a manner consistent with those made by the teacher. However, a disagreement has been found between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on fluency and mechanics of both the first draft and the last one (students overrated themselves). This disagreement may be partly due to the low English proficiency of students. These students do not have a very good command of English; hence, when assessing their own work, they may not identify every mistake in fluency and mechanics. This is probably the reason why students overrated themselves compared to the teacher. In addition, spelling, punctuation and capitalization are not always emphasized by teachers in class; they are rather left to students to grasp. This students' negligence may be another reason behind the disagreement on mechanics.

In addition, we used a semi-structured interview in order to know about students' attitudes about their improvement over the 8 weeks of doing the activity of self assessment. Students reported their perceptions; the majority of them was positive and found it useful; however only 3 students talked about disadvantages of using self assessment. Here are some of the extracts from the interview.

Student A: "my English is weak. It is difficult to write complex sentences. So I have to use simple sentences but they must be correct".
Student B: "practicing self-assessment makes me good at identifying my mistakes by myself".
Student C: "my paragraphs are more organized now".

Student D: "using rubrics helped me to identify my weaknesses and strengths".
Student E: "it is time consuming. I don't see its importance".
Student F: "it is the job of the teacher, why should I correct myself".
Student G: "I still do not grade myself like the teacher".

Conclusion

In the present paper we presented results of a simple classroom practice done at the department of English at Batna University. It investigated the effect of self- assessment on developing students' language learning in general and their writing in particular. In self-assessment, students do not simply provide output, but also are invited to enquire into the process of learning. This active involvement makes them partners in the pedagogic enterprise[27]. The results of practicing students' self-assessment in the module of written expression revealed that this activity developed in students an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses; it enhanced their critical thinking and developed in them metacognitive skills which enabled them to reflect on their written production. Self assessment can be a powerful and guiding force in the learning /teaching process.

Breen and Candlin[28] commented "judgments are a crucial part of knowledge, learning and any educational process". Therefore, learners' participation in self- assessment is of vital importance. As teachers we need to devote more to developing students' ability of providing feedback for themselves since helping students to be self-directed learners is of ultimate benefit to the students themselves.

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[27] **Widdowson, H G**.. Aspects of language teaching. n.p.: Oxford University Press, 1990.
[28] **Breen, M P. and C N. Candlin**. "The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching." 1(2) (1980).

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9. **Council of Europe**, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2001.
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13. **Grant, P and D Basye**. Personalized learning: A guide for engaging students with technology. n.p.: International Society for Technology in Education, 2014.
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16. **Hannafin, M J. and K M. Hannafin**. Cognition and student-centered, web-based learning: Issues and implications for research and theory. n.p.: In Learning and instruction in the digital age (pp. 11-23). Springer US, 2010.
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18. **Kijisklu, M N**.. "Attitudes of English Preparatory School Students' towards Using Technology at the Students' Self Study Centers (Doctoral dissertation, Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU))." (2011).

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20. **Knowles, MS**. The adult learner: the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development (6th ed.). Amsterdam ; Boston: Elesvier, 2005.

21. **O'malley, J M. and L V. Pierce**. "Authentic assessment for English language learners: Practical approaches for teachers." (1996).

22. **Rust, C and M Price**. "Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 28 (2003): 147-164.

23. **Taras, M.** "Student self-assessment: Processes and consequences." Teaching in Higher Education 15 (2010): 199-209.

24. **Temple, C and M L. Rodero**. Active Learning in a Democratic Classroom: The" Pedagogical Invariants" of Celestin Freinet (Reading around the World). n.p.: Reading Teacher, 49(2), 164-67, 1995.

25. **Widdowson, H G**.. Aspects of language teaching. n.p.: Oxford University Press, 1990.

APPENDIX A: Rubric for a Well-Written Paragraph

Categories of Performance	Beginner (1)	Basic (2)	Intermediate (3)	Advanced (4)
Topic sentence/ main idea	No evidence of a main idea. The paragraph lacks clarity and cohesion.	Topic sentence is present but poorly written. The main idea is not entirely clear.	Topic sentence is complete. The main idea is clearly stated	Topic sentence is strong and clearly states the main idea. Stimulates interest
Body/supporting sentences (3/5 related sentences)	Random ideas are hard to follow. Less than 3 complete sentences	Limited details to establish interest in the topic. Short/ choppy sentences	Body contains 3+ sentences. Mostly related details. Not all sentences are complete and focused.	Consistent development of main idea. Creates interest through details and

		that lack flow		varied sentence structure
Concluding sentence	There is no concluding sentence that connects to a main idea	The sentence is incomplete and does not sum up the paragraph	The sentence is complete and adequatly sums up the paragraph.	The sentence is complete and restates the main idea effectively.
Organization/ fluency	Paragraph lacks a clear focus. Confusing order of idea	Limited details. Shows effort to create order using simple language to express ideas	Appropriate choice of words. More care needed to create fluency	Well organized with clear topic, body and conclusion Flows logically. Consistent focus on topic.
Mechanics/word choice/ presentation	Many errors in grammar and spelling. Run- ons and lack of punctuation .Limited new new vocabulary	More than 5 errors in spelling and grammar. Words not always used correctly. Needs revision	Less than 5 errors in spelling and grammar. Shows variety of words.	Accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation. uses descriptive language. Neat final draft

Appendix B: **Semi-structured interview**

1. What is your attitude towards self-assessment?

2. How did you find the use of self assessment in writing?

3. In which way did it help you?