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On the Investigation of Iranian EFL Learners' Self-assessment and their ' Self-confidence and Sense of Autonomy

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Abstract
Assessment procedures are executed to facilitate learning and enhance student reflection. However, in many educational settings, once students submit their work, they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes (Thomas et al. 2011). Alternative assessment could be the best way to tackle the mentioned problem by actively engaging learners in the process of assessment and positively affecting their attitudes. Thus, the current study was an attempt to investigate at effects of self-assessment on students' attitudes with regard to some personality traits, i.e. self-confidence and sense of autonomy. To this end, 50 Iranian EFL learners studying English at intermediate level from a language institute in Teheran, Iran were selected. Two instruments were utilized in the current study, namely, OPT and Orsmond et al.'s (1997) Rating Scale Questionnaire. To this end, 50 EFL learners were selected and divided into two equal groups a the control group and an experimental group. The experimental had a treatment on the formal training on self-assessment. The participants in the control group were asked to assign a score, from 20 to 60, in order to rate their performance based on their own knowledge and hunch of the quality of their speaking. The experimental group was asked to rate its performance based on Likert Scale

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they got (ETS band descriptors). The participants turned in their recordings and scores in four different sessions. Findings revealed that participants in the experimental group reported gaining higher confidence and autonomy. The self-assessment ability of the mentioned group of participants showed an increase. It could be said that the students who received training became more optimistic and confident toward learning.
Keywords: Self-assessment; Self-confidence; Sense of Autonomy; Iranian EFL Learners.

Introduction

Butler and Lee (2010) identified the positive effects of the regular implementation of self-assessment in class on the students" confidence but not on other affective domains i.e., anxiety and intrinsic and instrumental motivation. In an autonomy-supportive environment, learners are less likely to feel anxious in the learning process and less likely to quit L2 learning (Leger, 2009).

De grez et al. (2010) investigated the relation between personal characteristics and performance in one hand the relation between personal characteristics and assessment on the other hand. They found self-efficacy as the most important variable affecting reliability of self-assessment.

In many countries, the teacher is the sole evaluator which may not be beneficial in case of performative tests such as writing compositions which do not have one correct answer. To compensate for this deficiency, alternative assessment including self-assessment has proposed by Birjandi and HadidiTamjid (2010). An adult student is the only one who knows intuitively the connection between the goals of the task assigned and their knowledge in different stages of learning (Leblanc & Pinchaud, 1985).

Balanced assessment can be created by involving students in the evaluation process in which learners are partners gaining a better image of themselves as writers, readers and assessors. More effective learners are those who concentrate on what they learn and how they learn (Javaherbakhsh, 2010).

Alfally (2004) concluded that learners who possessed a positive side of a trait were more accurate in self-assessment than who had its negative side, with the exception of those who had high classroom anxiety. Moreover, subjects with low self-esteem were the most accurate in rating their performance whereas students with instrumental motivation were the least accurate. The type of motivation and its role in the accuracy of self-assessment was also investigated. He reported that subjects with integrative motivation, regardless of their level of proficiency, assessed themselves high and more accurately than those with instrumental purposes. There was also less consistency between self-assessment of those with integrative purposes with teacher assessment than those with instrumental motivation. Moreover, students with high level of proficiency self-assessed themselves more

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accurately than the elementary and lower intermediate participants who overestimated their performance.

In Leger's (2009) experiment, subjects' self-perception in aspects of overall confidence in L2 speaking, fluency and vocabulary enhanced. He observed learners to take more responsibility of their own learning by setting goals. However, the rising awareness did not necessarily result in modifying learning behavior. Harris (1997) highlights the necessity of establishing clear criteria for students to use while they self-assess different tasks especially oral ones.

Introduction

According to Ross (2006), the term self-assessment has also been used in the metacognition literature to refer to" the judgments an individual makes on the basis of self-knowledge". From the learner's point of view, language skills in the classroom may be assessed in two fundamentally different forms. They include:

a) Assessment in the form of self-report or self-assessment; in this case assessment is seen as an internal or self-directed activity.

b) Assessment in the form of examinations and administration of tests; the assessor is regarded in the perspective of an 'outside agent', typically a teacher or examiner; assessment is seen as an external or 'other directed' activities (Oscarson, 1989).

Not only are there theoretical considerations in favor of application of self-assessment in education, but also there is proof that learners can achieve the capability to estimate their skills and performance in a reliable way (Janssen-Van Dieten, 1989). Through self-assessment students find the opportunity to provide a portrait of their own learning, so assessment is not viewed only as a means of measuring what students can do or know in a specific point in time (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000).

Self-assessment helps students to realize the difference between language learning and other kinds of studying. The huge gap springs from the emphasis made in language classes on performance rather than knowledge for its own sake (Harris, 1997). Self-assessment, also, leads students to the situation for thinking about how they go about learning.

Self-assessment includes three processes that students with self-regulating ability employ to observe and interpret their behavior (Ross, 2006). First, students produce and observe themselves, with concentration on their performance related to their subjective standards of success. Second, students Judge themselves and determine how well their general and specific goals were met. Third, learners interoperate the degree of goal achievement and express their happiness or disappointment related to meeting the goals.

Oscarson (1997) justifies the incorporation of self-assessment in language assessment in terms of widening perspective as they induce students as well as instructors to look at assessment as a mutual responsibility, not as the sole

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responsibility of the teacher. In conventional courses, learners and instructors often see things differently. As a result, change in sharing responsibility may cause advancement of communicative abilities. The democratic development of language teaching is another merit for self-directed assessment.

Although self-regulated classrooms are, in many cases, defined as learner-centered classroom, it does not mean that teacher hands over control, power and responsibility from the first day. Students must be trained to make informed choices and to make decisions on how to learn over time up to the end of the course (Nunan, 1999).

Statement of the Problem

In some researches, students quote a variety of reasons why they prefer self-assessment. Firstly, students say that they have better understanding of what they want to know or perform as they are asked to be involved in setting the criteria. Secondly, they believe with the opportunity self-assessment provides, they are enabled to assess some important performance aspects such as effort that is not usually evaluated, which makes assessment process fairer. In addition, learners can communicate some information about their performance that is not usually available to teachers in traditional testing; information can be about learners' goals and reasoning. In addition, through self-assessment, students learn the information which can help to enhance their learning. These benefits can control the trend in which students become pessimistic about the validity and reasonability of assessment since self-assessment can help students to concentrate on their achievement by explicit criteria rather than normative comparison to other students. Ross (2006) sees the success of self-assessment more likely if teachers provide direct instruction. That way, teachers can also improve students' behavior. The different affective factors like empathy, language anxiety, motivation and self-confidence associated with learners' emotional functioning that may affect language learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

In modern pedagogy, instructors should be able to adapt to their students' needs and desires which force them to apply a variety of testing methods and techniques (Birjandi & Hadidi Tamjid, 2010). Language instructors should involve the students in the path of learning in order to gain better educational results, which makes self-assessment a popular alternative for testing (Oscarson, 1989; Alfally, 2004; Leblanc & Pinchaud, 1985; Backman, 2000). The involvement is so crucial affectively since students can feel the progress they make by self-assessment (Javaherbakhsh, 2010; Harris, 1997); consequently, they would be more motivated. Self and peer assessment, in majority of cases, are supposed to be economical owing to the fact that they reduce the time and money spent for assessment (Patri, 2002; Strong –Krause, 2000).

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Significance of the Study

The findings of the present study would be used to develop the assessment and evaluation programs tailored to students' needs concerning their needs and attitudes. The results of the current investigation might shed light on the possible role that attitude might have on language learning. In fact, drawing on the results teachers would help language learners tackle the difficulty involved in the language learning. Following that, teachers would possibly be able to provide a more effective and efficient type of assessment when it comes to learning a foreign and second language.

Regarding the theoretical contributions, the nature of self-assessment in this study investigated further in the light of L1, and therefore; scholars might gain more insights into the possible interaction which might exist in the combined effect of self-assessment and L1 transfer on the learning. Finally, the results of the current study would be beneficial for curriculum designers and policy-makers.

Research Question

RQ. Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-assessment and their ' self-confidence and sense of autonomy?

Review of Literature

Empiricism, which defines the nature of learning as shaping or developing cognitive associations, finds authentic assessment as the methods to measure knowledge components. As a result, it focuses on mastery of language components using psychometrics to standardize tests. Influenced by Hume's epistemology, Empiricism finds knowledge as the collection of various components which make the whole. The interaction between structural linguists and behavioral psychologists provided the basis for discrete-point approach to testing. Habit formation and dissecting language to different parts gave birth to this track of evaluation. However, those practitioners who are affiliated with socio-culturalism interpret knowledge as the concept which is distributed across people and communities.

In this view, to learn is to increase ability to participate in a set of practice and to strengthen the ability to participate. In line with the ideology, assessing participation in inquiry and social practices of learning was highlighted and the role of students in the assessment process and integration into larger environment were emphasized (Farhadi,et al., 2005). A subcomponent of the latter trend, humanistic school of thought in psychology, accentuates the importance of the inner world of the leaner giving priority to individual's thoughts, feelings and emotions, The aspects of the learning process that were often neglected (Williams & Burden, 1997).

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Various measures used in alternative assessment include self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolios, learner diaries or journals, student-teacher conferences, interviews, and observations (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

Thomas (2011) emphasizes the focus of assessment to be on the process of learning rather than on how students learn after the point of assessment. He pinpoints assessment to have the power to frame how learners learn as it shows the priority of schools. Consequently, this may lead to missing the chance for better preparation of students for their life after graduation. So, the whole process of assessment must be seen in terms of how it shapes learning for the longer terms. This way of thinking put the pressure on test designers to devise forms of assessment enhancing efficient learning for whole life. He considers assessment to have the power to frame how learners learn as it shows the priority of schools which is more influential than any syllabus outline.

Alfally (2004) attributes self-assessment to more challenging, active and student-centered learning environment. According to Leblanc and Pinchaud (1985), it is a widespread belief that a teaching or learning strategy must ask students to have some input in learning cycle. It means that students should not feel their part in education is limited to studying the content which is selected by others through techniques forced by others to accomplish the goal defined by others. As evaluation is now accepted as a component in the educational process, students must be part of it.

Javaherbakhsh (2010) finds students in need of knowing about their abilities and the amount of their progress and things they can do with the skills they gained, while it increases the efficiency of their learning. There is also more to the issue of self-assessment. If students can assess themselves accurately, they do not have to rely solely on teachers for assessment. Harris (1997) establishes a link between the perception of progress and cultural differences. Language classes are affected by cultural expectations whose one aspect is making progress. In some countries learning is considered as the "digestion of a body of knowledge" and a great emphasis is put on memorization and reproduction. This means that a clash may occur between students‟ perceptions and goals of communicative foreign language learning.

Another difficulty may be disappointment which is inherent in learning skills such as listening and speaking because of the intangible progress. Self-assessment helps learners to realize the difference between language learning and other kinds of learning they face at their schools. The difference is the importance of performance in language rather than knowledge about the language.

Strong-Krause (2000) finds self-assessment as a viable source of information about a student's language knowledge with which institutes can reduce the costs of placement tests at the same time. Patri (2002) highlights the value of peer assessment to lower the costs regarding oral skills. Also,

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teachers‟ time can be focused on issues related to enhancing their teaching knowledge.

In a seminal study, Oscarson (1989) listed the advantages of promoting self-assessment by educators.

A) Promotion of learning: the training students receive in self-assessment is beneficial for its sake and it enhances their learning.

B) Raised level of awareness: self-assessment is a stimulus for learners to take course content and principles into account in a more discerning way than usual. Rather than giving all the responsibility to the teacher to decide what should be tested on and where and when tests happens, the students will not focus just on the results of their performance. Self-assessment, hereby, improves "evaluative attitude" in learners. By asking questions like 'What have I been doing recently?', 'How well have I done?', 'When will I be ready to test?‟ students monitor their learning.

C) Improved goal-orientation: in traditional testing, all goals are predetermined by an instructor which leads learners to adapt to the goals of the tests which they undertake at schools. Self-assessment helps learners to enhance their knowledge of the different possible goals in the variety of learning contexts. It provides the students with the better position to manipulate their learning situation to meet their needs, for example, leading the class in a desirable topic.

D) Expansion of range of assessment: Students have more knowledge in some aspects of competence than an outsider for example affective status. This is a convincing reason to involve students to bring about broadened horizons in the assessment of communicative competence.

E) Shared assessment burden: teacher can find more opportunity to focus on some other aspects of teaching by learner participation in testing process.

F) Post-course effects: students can learn how to assess their pedagogic goals which is so helpful even after graduation. It is in line with autonomous learning which is universally considered an important objective in modern pedagogy.

Alternative assessment has some specification (Javaherbakhsh, 2010):

A) Students are treated as individuals with specific quality and their own weakness and strength rather than comparing students with one another.

B) Some argue that the emphasis would be on students' strengths, what students know and perform rather than their weaknesses or what they do not know.

C) Cultural and affective variables are taken into account. There would be emphasis on learning styles as well.

Methodology

Participants

Consulting two language experts who were holding PhD. in TEFL, the researcher decided to exclude learners who scored 2 standard deviations

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(SD) above and below the mean. To this end, before conducting an an Oxford Placement Test, it was expected to select those whose score would fall between 39 and 81, and regarded as the main participants of the study. As the result, administering an OPT and based on the results of it, 60 out of 128 Iranian EFL learners from a language institute in Tehran, Iran, studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) were selected via systematic random sampling as the main participants of the current study. Their age ranged from 19 to 25.

Research Instruments and Materials

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

In order to check the level of general language proficiency of the participants at the beginning of the study, and to find out a homogenous sample, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used. The items of the OPT test were taken from 'Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test by Philips (2014).

Orsmond et al.'s (1997) Rating Scale Questionnaire

In order to investigate any potential change in affective variables and students, attitude toward self-rating Orsmond et al.'s (1997) Rating Scale Questionnaire was utilized. The first part of this scale checked if the scheme of self-assessment had any effect on the students' affective traits. Here are some samples of the question in Part 1 of this questionnaire:

Table 1. Some samples of Orsmond et al.'s (1997) rating scale

The scheme of self-assessment makes you:		
Dependent	Independent	Neither
Not think more	Think more	Neither

Data Collection Procedure

First of all, the stream of the study was explained to the participants. The students were given an OPT test in order to be homogenized. That is, the students whose scores were 2 SD above or below the mean were removed from sample. Then, 50 EFL learners were selected and divided into two equal groups a the control group and an experimental group. The experimental had a treatment on the formal training on self-assessment. The participants in the control group were asked to assign a score, from 20 to 60, in order to rate their performance based on their own knowledge and hunch of the quality of their speaking. The experimental group was asked to rate its performance based on Likert Scale they got (ETS band descriptors). The participants turned in their recordings and scores in four different sessions.

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As mentioned earlier, the first part consisted of the items investigating students' opinion on the interplay between the scheme of alternative assessment and a variety of affective variables including self-confidence and sense of autonomy.

Data Analysis

As illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, there was not a significant difference between the control and experimental groups' views towards the effect of self-assessment on their confidence (Chi-Square = 4.57, P =.102 >.05).

Table 2. Pearson chi-square comparing control and experimental groups to discover the relationship between self-Assessment and confidence

		Scheme		Choices			Total
				Lack of Confidence	Gain confidence	Neither	
2	Group	Control	Count	6	9	5	20
			% within Group	30.0%	45.0%	25.0%	100.0 %
			Std. Residual	1.0	-1.0	.8	
		Experimental	Count	3	19	3	25
			% within Group	12.0%	76.0%	12.0%	100.0 %
			Std. Residual	-.9	.9	-.7	
		Total	Count	9	28	8	45
			% within Group	20.0%	62.2%	17.8%	100.0 %

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Table 3.

Scheme		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
2	Pearson Chi-Square	4.572d	2	.102

a. 2 cells (50%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.56.

Concerning the learners' self-assessment and autonomy, the findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the control and experimental groups' views towards the effect of self-assessment on their autonomy (Chi-Square = 20.93, P =.000 <.05). The experimental group has become independent following self-assessment (Std. Residual = 2.1) while the control group has become less independent (Std. Residual = -2.3).

Table 3. Pearson chi-square comparing control and experimental groups to discover the relationship between self-Assessment and autonomy

	Scheme		Choices			Total
			dependent	independent	Neither	
1 Group	Control	Count	3	3	14	20
		% within Group	15.0%	15.0%	70.0%	100.0 %
		Std. Residual	1.4	-2.3	2.0	
	Experimental	Count	0	20	4	24
		% within Group	0.0%	83.3%	16.7%	100.0 %
		Std. Residual	-1.3	2.1	-1.9	
	Total	Count	3	23	18	44
		% within Group	6.8%	52.3%	40.9%	100.0 %

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Table 4.

Scheme		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
1	Pearson Chi-Square	20. 930a	2	.000

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.36.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study highlighted the undeniable effect of applying self-assessment on students' characteristics. Regarding autonomy, the treated subjects expressed the fact that they felt more autonomous after passing the course in self-assessment. This study provided further evidence of the impact that learners' beliefs and emotions might have on language learning. Learners' beliefs about roles and responsibilities in language learning would have a significant impact on their ability to succeed, especially in an environment in which the instructor's role fades away.

Participants in the experimental group reported gaining higher confidence and autonomy. The self-assessment ability of the mentioned group of participants showed an increase. It could be said that the students who received training became more optimistic and confident toward learning. Moreover, learners' ability to respond to affective challenges might not only affect the participants' enjoyment of the experience, but may indeed influence the learning outcomes. The result also showed that students were able to comprehend the changes they undergone through with the help of teacher in the course of self-assessment. They were assigned a part of the assessment process which helped them to make informed choices on their performance. This change is in line with what Oscarson (1989, p. 55) calls "widening the perspective of the students".

The result of the chi square test showed no significant difference between two groups of participants. More participants in experimental group expressed that self-assessment helped them to gain confidence. It might root in the mastery students had developed in the course of training which naturally improved students' situational confidence. To look at the issue more closely, some of the students in the experimental group might feel that they needed longer training to gain the confidence necessary to evaluate their performance.

Conclusions

It was concluded that the use of alternative assessment procedures through the course of this study seemed to lead to a significant change in the attitudes of the learners of the experimental group toward self-assessment. The students found the approach to assessment a constructive method,

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which would help to alleviate some of the shortcomings observed in conventional method of assessment. Nevertheless, they expressed their understanding of the difficulties involved in the implementation of self-assessment e.g. being time consuming or difficult. The improvement in subjects' personality traits e.g. sense of autonomy and sense of confidence also add to the saliency of the results.

The findings of this research suggested that implementation of alternative assessment procedures were helpful in improving EFL students' learning and testing qualities in order to enrich teaching and learning process. In fact, the result of this paper, would be used in all educational centers. It had direct and indirect implications and applications in teaching, learning, materials development, and testing procedure.

In addition, teachers would benefit greatly from the scheme of self-assessment as making criteria explicit to students might help them to spell out their intentions to learners. That way, the learners would distinguish the essentials from less important features of their performance. It might cause more fruitful reflection by learners on their path of learning. Teacher-student debate to resolve the ambiguity between self- and teacher-assessments would offer teachers a precise insight into student thinking, particularly learners' misconceptions that hinder further learning.

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