

## **PREPARING INDEPENDENT LEARNERS: THE ROLE OF SELF-ASSESSMENT**

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### *ABSTRACT*

What is the value of self-assessment in language learning? And, how do you get language learners to evaluate and monitor their own work? What is the role of the student? The teacher? What teaching approaches facilitate engagement of learners in the self-assessment process? Research on how people learn indicates that those who are actively engaged in strategy use and in monitoring what and how they learn are more likely to be successful language learners than those who do not. This article reports on what research tells us about self-assessment and draws implications for engaging language learners in the self-assessment process.

### CONTEXT FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT

Changes in instructional practice and concerns about the limitations of traditional approaches to assessment<sup>1</sup> over the past two decades have led to the search for a more coherent form of assessment, one which is linked to and is used to inform instruction. This search has been based on views of how students learn and what effective teachers can do to promote learning. Behavioral models of learning, also called transmission-oriented models, have produced teachers who lecture, present material, and then test students to see how much they can remember of what has been “covered.” These models are based on the view that there are truths to be acquired that are independent of the learner and that the more truths one acquires, the more knowledge one possesses.

More recent constructivist approaches to learning, on the other hand, propose that learners generate knowledge based on their own existing beliefs and experiences or prior knowledge (Airasian & Walsh, 1997; Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992). Constructivist approaches to learning are based on cognitive learning theory and support the notion that students learn best when they are actively applying learning strategies that facilitate their acquisition of language and concepts (Herman, et al., 1992; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Constructivist views reflect a response to the perception that traditional approaches to teaching have resulted in rote learning of discrete skills rather than the strategic use of higher order thinking and problem solving skills that promote independent learning.

As approaches to instruction change, so do the role of the teacher and the learner. In constructivist classrooms, the teacher is no longer the sole source of information; the student becomes more active in learning, has more choices, and begins to take more responsibility for his/her learning. The teacher plans instructional activities that draw the learner into the thinking process while also providing clear expectations for students' work and showing examples of excellent work. The student begins to learn when to use knowledge, how to adapt it, and how to manage his/her own learning. Learning activities upon which assessment is based have relevance and meaning for students and promote application of skills. They also address the social nature of learning by teaching students how to collaborate on projects and how to provide constructive feedback to one another through peer conferencing (Herman et al., 1992).

Cognitive learning theory supports the need to monitor student progress by integrating assessment and instruction through embedded or authentic approaches to instruction and assessment. Authentic assessment is authentic in that it mirrors classroom instruction (thereby producing content validity) and reflects applications of learning to the real world (Herman et al., 1992). Authentic assessment includes the products of learning as well as the processes engaged in learning, such as the various steps involved in the writing process, from brainstorming to outlining to the first draft and the final paper. Authentic assessment is not limited to single-answer paper-and-pencil tests but includes contextualized problems that can be solved using a variety of problem solving approaches and that may result in a number of divergent answers. In addition, no single assessment is used as the measure of student growth. Instead, multiple measures over time are used to ensure reliable information on student progress (Herman et al., 1992). Much more research is needed on how constructivist approaches to teaching work across different content areas and with students of different ages and levels of language proficiency. Therefore, it is best to aim for a balance of teaching approaches that incorporate aspects of both traditional and constructivist learning (Airasian & Walsh, 1997).

## PURPOSE OF SELF-ASSESSMENT

A key element of authentic assessment is self-assessment or the self-evaluation process that involves monitoring one's learning progress through reflection, feedback, and revision. Self-assessment is the process of reflecting on one's performance and revising or redirecting it in order to improve it. Self-assessment is a metacognitive

learning strategy that can be taught to students to help them redirect their learning efforts toward improvement.

Teaching students to reflect on their work for the purpose of improving their performance helps students learn to monitor their own progress and teachers to evaluate the learning process of each student. Steps to teaching self-assessment may include having students generate the criteria for assessment of performance tasks, apply the criteria to the work of others, and then apply the criteria to their own work to help them set learning goals (Clemmons, Laase, Cooper, Areglado, & Dill, 1993; Valdez Pierce, 1998). The teacher presents students with a sample of student work (such as a writing sample) or a student's performance of a task (such as a videotape of a student giving an oral report) and asks students to generate the elements that characterize the work sample or performance in terms of both its positive and negative aspects. Self-assessment for language learners typically begins with peer assessment such as through peer editing and feedback in writers' workshop, and portfolios. Students first learn how to judge a sample of someone else's work or performance of a task against specific standards or criteria for performance before learning how to apply these same criteria to their own work.

The purpose of teaching self-assessment to language learners is to develop active, independent learners who can monitor their own work and set learning goals for themselves. Self-assessment can help students make choices as to how to manage their time, what materials to use, and what to do next (Smolen et al, 1995). The self-assessment process also provides feedback to teachers that can help provide individualized instruction that meets each student's needs (McNamara & Deane, 1995).

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Research on the effectiveness of self-evaluation and self-assessment stems from studies on the use of learning strategies with native speakers of English. The metacognitive strategy of self-assessment is tied to the concept of self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learners "plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor, and self-evaluate at various points during the process of acquisition" (Zimmerman, 1990, pp. 4-5). These learners also report high levels of self-efficacy or motivation to self-regulate in order to accomplish goals. Zimmerman has proposed that self-regulated learners are self-starters who exhibit extraordinary effort and persistence during the learning process; they are proactive in their efforts to find and benefit from learning activities. Self-regulated learners can be characterized by three features: (1) their awareness of the relationship between their use of strategic learning and learning outcomes and their use of these strategies to achieve their goals; (2) their responsiveness to self-generated feedback; and (3) their interdependent motivational processes. A growing body of research indicates the key role that students' use of self-regulated learning strategies (including self-assessment) plays in their academic achievement (Zimmerman, 1990).

Studies of applications of self-assessment to second language learners show a number of variables involved in determining its effectiveness, including: learners' beliefs about language learning, age, motivation, prior language learning experience, learning style, the learning setting, the task, and gender of the learner (Ellis, 1994). Much of the research on learning strategy use by language learners has been con-

ducted with adults, but some first language strategy instruction has been successfully conducted with elementary and secondary schoolchildren in reading comprehension, mathematical problem solving, and vocabulary learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Some tentative conclusions from the wide range of learning strategy studies conducted with second language learners include: (1) learning strategies used reflect the second language proficiency level of the learner; (2) metacognitive strategies are more often used by advanced learners (beginners may benefit from learning strategy instruction in their native language); (3) successful learners use learning strategies more frequently and in different ways than less successful learners; (4) successful learners select those strategies that are most appropriate for a given task; (5) learning strategies used by adults and children may differ, with social and interactional strategies being more effective with young learners; and (6) metacognitive strategies involving self-assessment, monitoring, planning, and goal-setting are underused but quite useful for older learners (Ellis, 1994). Learning strategy instruction has been shown to be useful, but depends on the many learner and task variables named above. Few longitudinal (multi-year) studies have been conducted of learning strategy use.

Research on the metacognitive learning strategy of self-assessment suggests that students who learn to monitor their work and set learning goals for themselves are more effective learners than those who do not (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oscarson, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). Some studies have shown a relationship between self-assessment and increased responsibility on the part of students (Rief, 1990; Smolen et al., 1995; Tierney et al, 1991; Wolf, 1989). Studies of language learners have shown the benefits of self-assessment and peer assessment to student motivation, achievement and self-esteem (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Blue, 1994; Ellis, 1994; Kolls, 1992; Lee, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Paris & Ayers, 1994; Smolen, Newman, Wathen, & Lee, 1995). Self-assessment has also been linked to increased self-efficacy in language learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Blue (1994) has suggested that self-assessment benefits students because it helps them evaluate the level of effort they are putting forth and the relative outcome of that effort, helps build a positive self-image, and helps learners begin to see their individual capabilities. However, in spite of these positive findings, we know that few language learners engage in self-assessment to improve their learning (Oxford, 1990).

Much of the research on learning strategy use has relied on self-reports by learners, but the reliability of retrospection and introspection is questionable (Ellis, 1994). Oscarson (1989) found that the more closely the self-assessment measure relates to a student's reason for using the language, the more reliable the information becomes. Bachman & Palmer (1989) discovered that the type of questions used in self-assessments influenced the size of the correlations between self-rating scores and scores obtained on language proficiency tests. Harris (1997) suggests that where students' self-assessment ratings do not match actual performance, this may be due to lack of student training.

## OBSTACLES TO SELF-ASSESSMENT

Even though a number of studies support learners' reflection on their work through self-assessment, several realities have precluded widespread use of self-assessment

with English language learners (ELLs). The first is that many, if not most, students believe that the teacher alone is responsible for evaluating their work. This assumption stems from prior experience, traditional teaching, and the view that students are not capable of evaluating their own performance. A second obstacle to self-assessment is the teacher's lack of knowledge in leading students in the self-assessment process. This may be due to a lack of teacher training in self-assessment, a need for information on the value of self-assessment, or adherence to a traditional, teacher-led classroom. Another block to self-assessment is the teacher's belief that because students are not proficient in English, they are not capable of evaluating their own work. Still another teacher assumption that can preclude self-assessment is that young children do not have the skills necessary to evaluate their own work.

Contrary to these assumptions, teachers who engage their students in self-assessment attest to their own abilities to teach and their students' abilities to engage in the process of self-evaluation. Learners of all ages, even kindergartners, can be engaged in self-monitoring of their work with proper teacher guidance (Clemmons et. al., 1993; Rief, 1990; Sperling, 1993; Zimmerman, 1990).

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING STUDENTS

In many traditional classrooms, particularly those in countries where English is not the primary language of instruction, the notion of self-assessment goes against deep-rooted cultural expectations of the teacher-student relationship (Harris, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Many students in these settings regard learning as the mastery of a body of knowledge which they memorize and reproduce on tests. These students have become accustomed to language learning as being the mastery of grammar and vocabulary rather than as the ability to actually use the language in real-life settings. Teachers need to be sensitive to these perceptions and exert patience and persistence in implementing an innovative assessment approach such as self-assessment, especially with older learners who may have had more time to form strong expectations of the teacher.

Students from traditional educational backgrounds will need time to deal with less than explicit direction from the teacher. Through modeling and the use of demonstrations, the teacher can teach students how to think for themselves rather than depend on the teacher's answers and corrections. Students also need to be guided in learning how to express ideas in their own words rather than by reciting directly from printed texts. Finally, students will need to be instructed in the skill of providing constructive feedback to their peers.

Providing peer feedback is one of several steps to self-assessment that students need to learn how to do. With teacher guidance, students can learn how to judge each other's work using specific criteria and ultimately how to monitor their own work. As students get more experience in monitoring their own progress, they can begin to learn how to set short- and long-term goals for learning by identifying strengths and weaknesses in their work. They can accomplish this by reflecting on their work and completing weekly learning goal cards or learning logs that the teacher reviews and comments on. Through self-assessment, students become active learners who take more responsibility for their learning.

For beginning level language proficiency students, teachers can consider several options. Beginners can be introduced to self-assessment in their native language and, with increasing proficiency in English, can later do this in English.

Another option is to use scaffolding or language supports such as visuals, graphics, and simplified language to help these students reflect on their work. A final option is to delay self-assessment for beginning language learners for a brief period until their proficiency is at a level that enables them to communicate their reflections in English.

## TEACHING APPROACHES THAT PROMOTE SELF-ASSESSMENT

To identify those teaching approaches that promote self-assessment in the classroom, we need to begin with the roots of self-assessment in authentic assessment. Authentic assessment has its origins in a constructivist philosophy of teaching called whole language (also known as student-centered learning). Much of the whole language philosophy involves relating curriculum and instruction to students' lives and interests; this is what makes whole language instruction authentic. Whole language teachers begin by focusing on each learner's strengths and building on these rather than trying to identify and correct everything that is perceived to be wrong with the student. In addition, social interaction in the classroom is encouraged because it helps students engage in active, authentic language use through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Finally, whole language fosters independent learning through reflective, ongoing evaluation by students. Whole language views the goal of all education as independence (Routman, 1994).

Instructional and assessment approaches that are based in whole language and are likely to promote active student participation and independence in learning include collaborative learning, hands-on learning, inquiry-based projects, performance-based assessments and providing frequent feedback to learners. These approaches call for much trial and error on the part of both teachers and students and will require patience and persistence to implement (Airasian & Walsh, 1997; Herman et al., 1992; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Based on the research on learning strategies and assumptions teachers and students make about learning, we can propose a few implications for teachers who want to begin to implement self-assessment with their own students. First, teachers need to overcome the belief that they are the only ones capable of evaluating student work and that language learning students do not have the language proficiency necessary to engage in self-assessment. Teachers can do this by getting to know their students and their interests and by creating a safe and responsive rather than judgmental environment. Engaging students in collaborative activities that encourage their input in what will be learned, how it will be learned, and how student performance will be evaluated is key to setting the stage for teaching the importance of self-assessment

and its uses (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Teachers become coaches who guide students in learning rather than tell them the (single) correct answer, thereby accepting diversity in student responses and creations (Airasian & Walsh, 1997). The notion of "giving up control" to the students is frightening at first but gives way to perceptions of student responsibility and efficacy (Routman, 1994). Teachers with more experience as traditional teachers will need more time to change their behaviors to become teachers who guide, coach, and involve learners in the assessment process.

Second, teachers need to teach the importance of self-evaluation to students as it affects their everyday lives. They can do this by modeling and giving examples. One example is to think of self-assessment as feedback for moving forward, similar to using a map to arrive at one place from another. Third, teachers need to make class time to teach learning strategies, and in particular, self-assessment approaches to their students. Direct instruction in learning strategies has been shown to be related to increased reading comprehension and second language acquisition (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). This implies that teachers need to learn how to determine which learning strategies their students need as well as how to teach these strategies.

Fourth, teachers need to establish clear standards and criteria (parameters of performance such as scoring rubrics and benchmark papers) for students to use to guide their learning and self-assessment. While most teachers assign grades to student work, few specify to students in advance of an assignment the criteria by which their work will be evaluated. Fifth, teachers need to provide regular feedback to students as to what their strengths and weaknesses are and how they can improve their learning. Many teachers feel that they have no time to grade everything their students produce but feel compelled to do so because otherwise the students feel that ungraded assignments have no value. To overcome this, teachers need to give students time to get used to the idea that self-assessment activities are not meant to be graded but to provide criterion-referenced feedback on what the student needs to do in order to learn more effectively.

Sixth, teachers need to begin to keep records to document student growth rather than just keep this information in their heads. Grades are of no help when we want to know what students are capable of doing in a learning situation. Teachers need records of what tasks students have mastered and which they are still learning how to do. By using clear evaluation criteria in the form of checklists, scoring rubrics and rating scales, and anecdotal records, teachers can ensure that they are keeping objective data and proceed to cross-check it by using a variety of documentation tools.

Finally, just as teachers need to help students set realistic goals for learning, they also need to set attainable goals for their own implementation of self-assessment in the classroom. It is best to start small, with one new teaching approach or activity at a time.

## TEACHING SELF-ASSESSMENT

Steps to teaching self-assessment include: teacher modeling and demonstration, direct explanation of strategy use and its benefits, involving students in generating and applying criteria for assessment relative to a sample of student work, practice opportunities for applying the strategy (to include scaffolding or support for lan-



guage learners), and independent use of the strategy in new tasks (Clemmons et al., 1993; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Teachers need to schedule time for self-assessment in their daily teaching plans to include time for student reflection on their work, peer feedback, and student-teacher conferencing (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Making time for reviewing and evaluating student work as a whole class or in pairs will take longer than the time involved in scoring multiple-choice or single-answer response tests.

Paris and Newman (1990) found that self-regulated learning and self-assessment can be fostered by teachers who minimize academic competition, explain and demonstrate appropriate strategies, provide assistance during problem solving, and promote an atmosphere of collaboration in classrooms. In addition, teachers who create positive affective climates that lead to valuing learning and being motivated to set and achieve learning goals (that are meaningful to the student) while also teaching self-assessment and other learning strategies can produce learners who are willing and able to take control of their own learning (McCombs & Marzano, 1990). Teaching approaches that have a chilling effect on self-assessment include norm-referenced testing and normative grading practices. These approaches can only produce a negative impact on metacognitive and cognitive skills development for students who tend to do poorly on tests (Herman et al., 1992; McCombs & Marzano, 1990).

Teaching students to set realistic goals and evaluate their own learning progress can help increase the accuracy of self-assessment (Blue, 1994; Schunk, 1990). Setting realistic goals includes setting upper and lower goal limits and can be achieved through the use of games, learning contracts, and goal-setting conferences (Schunk, 1990). Interestingly, Schunk found that goals set too high or too low do not promote self-efficacy. Easy goals do not promote self-efficacy because it does not give students an idea of what they are capable of doing.

Goals set using specific performance standards are more likely to promote learning and activate self-assessment than general goals because student progress is easier to gauge (Schunk, 1990). Blue found evidence that students who assess their language level realistically may persevere with language learning to a greater extent than those whose self-assessment is unrealistically high or low.

Instruction in self-assessment can improve student performance but does not necessarily ensure transfer due to many students' belief that the strategy is not as important for success as are other factors such as time or effort (Schunk, 1990). Transfer of strategy training to new tasks can be maximized by pairing metacognitive strategies such as self-assessment with appropriate cognitive strategies that help learners manipulate materials to increase learning (e.g., notetaking, using resource materials, summarizing) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Effective instruction in self-assessment can help students see limitations in their perceptions of their own competence, change the way they tackle problems, see themselves as agents capable of learning, and make them more effective learners (McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Paris & Newman, 1990). It also encourages whole-class sharing of the difficulties and solutions both successful and less successful students found in tackling problems. In addition, effective strategy training promotes active participation and collaboration such as through peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, collaborative writing, brainstorming, and cooperative learning (Paris & Newman, 1990). Paris



& Newman propose the intriguing notion that high achievers are more likely than low achievers to rely on others when they need academic assistance whereas learners who need help the most are the least likely to seek it and become passive learners. The challenge for teachers is in finding a way to encourage learners in their progress while also helping them set attainable learning goals, helping them realize that language learning is a long-term process.

## CONCLUSION

Concerns about the limitations of traditional approaches to assessment have resulted in changes in instruction and assessment that focus on the learner as an active agent responsible for his/her own learning. These changes have consequences for the roles of the teacher and the learner in the learning setting. Research on learning strategy instruction, and in particular on self-assessment, has shown the benefits of direct instruction in self-assessment to student achievement and independence in language learning.

Important implications for teachers include the need to re-evaluate how they teach and to determine how, when, and where to obtain instruction on how to introduce their students to the self-assessment process. Once teachers obtain training, they can make a plan for guiding students in monitoring their own work and setting learning goals for themselves. Through the establishment of collaborative classrooms, modeling, and active student engagement in evaluating the work of peers as well as their own work, teachers can begin to nurture independent learners who carefully reflect on their work for the purpose of improving it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term assessment will be used throughout this article instead of the word testing to promote thinking beyond traditional definitions of testing.

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