

Case study

Self-Assessment on Iranian Foreign Language Learners' Oral Performance Ability: a Case Study

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Objectives: Self-assessment, as one type of alternative assessment, with the increased attention to learner-centered curricula, needs analysis, and learner autonomy has gained popularity in recent years. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of self-assessment on Javanroodian Foreign Language (Kordestan) Learners' Oral Performance ability.

Methods: The assessment program involved training, practice, videotaping, feedback, assessment and discussion. Twenty English as a foreign language students of foreign language institutes in Javanrood participated in the study. They were divided into experimental and control group, based on the results of English oral performance pre- tests. The research instrument consisted of a self- assessment checklist containing subcategories related to the organization of the presentation, content, linguistic factors (vocabulary use, grammatical rules and pronunciation) and interaction with the audience. It was developed as a result of interviewing participants and their teachers and then adapting results based on the results of reviewing available checklists in the literature. The data was collected by the experimental group members' self- assessments of their 6 oral performances and the teacher's assessment of their performances.

Results: The obtained data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential methods. Results indicated that participating in self- assessment process had positive effect on learners' oral performance ability.

Discussion: Results will have implications for policy makers, material designers and developers, teachers and learners. It will also open up the doors of introducing new trends in assessment to teachers and learners.

Key words: Self-assessment, oral performance, Javanrood, Alternative assessment, Formative assessment

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Introduction

Self-assessment (SA), as one type of alternative assessment, with the increased attention to learner-centered curricula, needs analysis, and learner autonomy has gained popularity in recent years and its potential value as an instructional tool to facilitate learning as well as a measurement tool has been a topic of much discussion (1,2). The increasing interest in such methods has been driven by increasing recognition of the need to engage learners as active participants in the learning process and to equip them with the skills required to be effective life-long learners (3). Many have argued that teachers should help students construct knowledge through active involvement in assessing their own

learning performance, and that students are empowered by gaining ownership of their learning and life-long learning skills. Research on language pedagogy especially recommends that teachers should provide opportunities for students to assess their language level so as to help them focus on their own learning (1, 4-8).

In Iran educational system, students start learning English from junior high school and continue it till the end of the pre- university courses. It means they spend 7 years studying English in formal education systems. In addition, those learners who afford participating in private foreign language institutes, spent more time on studying English. Despite the huge amount of time and budget dedicated to

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learning English most of the Iranian learners have difficulty with this subject area. The problems are more severe in oral proficiency skills of these learners of English as a foreign language. In Iranian schools, especially in Javanrood, students are assessed solely by instructors; this activity is intended to improve the students' performance. Learners are not given the chance to assess their own performance. In this regard Luoma (9) have written that: SA is intended to help students understand the goals of tasks, reflect on what they have achieved with reference to such goals, and figure out what it will take to finally reach their goals. Despite the importance of SA, learners are rarely put in charge of rating their own performance. Within this situation, as Taras (10) argued, teachers are sending out the wrong message to students. They lead them to believe that the main focus of interest is the grade. After teachers' correction of their students' paper, the things they receive is marks, some question symbols and some ticks. Once students submit their work they typically become disengaged with the assessment process. Hence, opportunities for learning are lost as they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes. This is true in the context of Asian countries, especially Iranian learners of English as a foreign language. That is because the learning context has traditionally been focused on teacher centered instruction and measurement-driven assessments, and the environment is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness among students. Littlewoods (11) Observed in his studies that East Asian students expect the teacher, as the holder of authority and knowledge, to be responsible for the learning assessment. Thus, one may expect that SA might recently work well in Asian classrooms because, according to Sluijsmans (12), Asian societies recently tend to attribute educational success to effort rather than ability.

The researchers after reviewing the related literature came to the conclusion that, although SA has been prevalent for a number of years in such fields as psychology, sociology, business, and so on, its use in second and foreign language teaching/learning has remained rather rare. And studies investigating the impact of students' SA on their performance in oral performance in English in Iran are rare. To the best knowledge of the researchers there are only two researches in SA era which were done in the context of oral performance skill. Therefore, this study is one of the first studies dealing with the implementation of this technique, and maybe the first one done in oral

proficiency domain in Iran. So, While self-assessment has been promoted in various educational contexts, very little empirical examination has been undertaken of its instructional effectiveness in foreign language learning, especially oral performance area. One may also surmise that the implementation of self-assessment can be challenging if the learning context, like the learning context of Iran, has traditionally been focused on teacher-centered instruction and measurement-driven assessments, or if the environment is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness among students. Hence; the present study aims to improve the understanding of learners' self-assessment by examining the effectiveness of self-assessment in oral performance domain in Iran as a case study.

Furthermore, the inconsistent findings of research on SA highlight the need for more research. A similar plea was also voiced by some scholars such as Brantmeier (13) and Ross (14), acknowledging the scarcity of research in the area of SA in foreign or second language context. Therefore, the present research is an attempt to provide empirical evidence concerning the use and consequences of SA. In other word, this research is an attempt to answer the following research question, and investigate the following null hypothesis: Does implementation of SA have any effect on learners' oral performance skill?

A number of studies have been done investigating this topic and their results will be provided in the following paragraphs. Review of the related literature. As an example, in a study Javaherbakhsh (15) investigated the effect of Iranian advanced level learners' SA on their performance in writing in English. The participants of the study were 73 learners who were divided into an experimental and a control group. In this research data was collected using a TOEFL test, a rating checklist, and two writing tests; pre and post-tests. A set of statistical tests including Pearson Product coefficient, independent sample t-test, and KS test were run for data analysis. Results indicated that the SA treatment administered to the experimental group had a significant effect on the learners' performance on the post-test of writing. In another study, Fin chant (16) examined applying SA as a valuable additional means of improving oral abilities. They developed a test focusing on the improvement in spoken English of 1700 Freshman University learners over an academic year (64 hours). This was administered and evaluated using established oral-test criteria. They looked at improvement rather than

level of achievement, and the Conversation-English course taken by the learners was the basis of the test. Results showed that: 1) preparation for the test necessitated active spoken participation in lessons, 2) lessons tended to utilize task-based communicative teaching methods, 3) the means became the end - the test was not only a reason for developing oral skills, but also a means of achieving that goal.

Naeni (17) In a study investigated the effect of SA on 121 female and male ELT Iranian University learners during the academic year of 2008-2009 at three universities. They were all first-year undergraduate ELT learners taken the advanced writing course. The intermediate Nelson Language Proficiency Test, a writing check list and speaking and writing pre- and post- tests were used in data collection part. Data were analyzed using ANOVA and SPSS tools. The results indicated the significant improvement in the learners' writing ability applying the writing SA checklist. In Asian context, Baniabdelrahman (18) investigated the effect of Jordanian Eleventh grade students' SA on their performance in reading in English. The participants of the study consisted of an experimental group and a control group; (67 male and 69 female students). A reading test was developed and its validity and reliability were established. To collect data about the students' progress, student SA through one-minute papers and rating-scale sheets were used. The findings of the study revealed that student SA had positive effect on their performance in reading in English.

If the results of the study indicate the positive effect of SA on learners' performance and prove that their ability increases overtime, then it will shed some light on the importance and value of this technique in improving students' performance in oral proficiency in English. Thus, learners, teachers, policy makers, test developers and material developers will benefit the results. It will also open up the doors of introducing new trends in assessment to teachers and learners.

Methods

The study was conducted within courses at one of the foreign language institutes in Javanrood. The classes were meeting five hours per week during three semesters. During the first semester the participants were taught the book "interchange 3, third edition" book by Jack C. Richard, Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor (4). At the last two semesters they were taught "Headway 3" book by Liz and John Soars (5). In both sources, each unit includes the

introduction of a new grammatical point, a topic to be talked about and related vocabularies to help learners expand their oral presentation performance and a reading section. Assessment process was integrated into the learning and teaching in the course. In addition to speaking tasks such as individual speech, class discussion learners were required to assess their own oral performances. It worth mentioning that although other skills including reading, writing and listening were also worked on, but they were in improving oral performance of students' service.

Furthermore, the present researchers have in every way tried to meet the ethical issues. The learners participating in the study were informed at the beginning of the study about the project, the steps which are intended to be followed and what are expected from them to do during the implementation of the study. The researchers also called the participants' parents or talked with them in the institutes about the project and their permissions were obtained. At each video- taping session, participants were reminded that the files will not be shown to anyone without their permission. To make the process of SA as ethical as possible, attention was also paid to the participants' affective state. Participants indicated that they are afraid of making themselves exposed to the teacher, and they felt worried about the effect of their SAs on their final marks at the end of semester. To help learners' feel relax during the process, they were given assurance that their SAs will not be shown to their teacher and the results will not count as a part of their final check mark.

Participants - The participants in the study included English teachers and students. Students were 20 native Kurdish learners (both male and female), aged between 15- 19 years, from Javanrood foreign language institutes, who exhibited various degrees of spoken proficiency in English. All of them have passed Intro, New interchange 1 and 2 series book in the previous terms. Ten of them served as the experimental group and another ten ones as the members of the control group. They participated in English classes of these institutes to become capable of speaking English and improve their oral proficiency skills. The teachers were non- native speakers of English who had been working in foreign language institutes for more than five years. Three of them also had the experience of teaching in high school for more than ten years. Four of them had academic degree in teaching English as a

foreign language TEFL (including a candidate learner of PhD degree, an MA degree, and two BA degrees) and one of them had BA in English Translation. Three of them were also the institutes' managers.

Participants' selection procedures - Students were chosen among a population of all male and female learners, who have passed the Intro, New interchange 1 and 2 series book in Javanrood foreign language institutes, with the total number of 50 learners. The emphasis on passing these course books was because of the fact that, these sources have a part called SA activity. And as learners had the experience of completing these parts, they somehow have familiarity with the concept of SA. Because of this, they might have less difficulty doing SA process compared with other learners.

The aims of the present research and the procedures, which were intended to be followed during the study, were described in detail for all the 50 learners. They were given the interval time of a week to talk with their families and think deeply and decided whether they wanted to participate in this research or not. At first, 5 learners eagerly accepted to take part in the study. But after discussing the advantages of the SA process and describing its cited effects, in the literature review for learners and their learning, another 5 learners showed enthusiasm to take part in the process. This total number of 10 learners served as the members of the experimental group. This group included 8 females and 2 males. They were told that their SA scores would not be used for determining final grades. They were also given the assurance that their video- taped performance will not be shown to anyone without their permission. Other learners' reasons for not accepting to participate was lack of time, being busy studying their school books, fear of not having qualities to do SA, fear of their performance being video- taped. For the other 40 students, it was explained that the research needs a control group. It was added that the members of the control group don not need to do anything especial, except participating in a pre- and post- test. Then, a test of oral performance was administered among this population. A version of this test is presented in the appendix A section. To guarantee the validity of the test, the items were selected from the book which was written by the authors of the learners' source book. Then it was delivered up to a specialist in TEFL, with PhD degree and over ten years' experience of teaching English. The specialist examined the test and

provided his comments and suggestions for modifications. His comments were met and relative modifications were implemented. Before delivering up the questions to the participants, their teachers' ideas were also asked. They stated that they were good items which fitted learners' level and covering their text book content.

Participants were explained that they are only needed to choose one answer, and they should the most appropriate one. They were asked not to choose the items by chance. They were also explained that in correcting the papers the negative mark will be considered for the wrong answers. Based on the results of this test 16 learners which their level of proficiency seemed to be close to the proficiency level of the members of the experimental group was chosen. In order to have a homogeneous experimental and control group, they were all, individually, interviewed on the topic of "what are advantages and disadvantages of living in a city?" These interviews were scored by the researchers and served as the pre- test of the study. Based on the results of the pre- test implementation 10 students, whose performance average was perfectly matched the average of the experimental groups' performance, were selected. As the principals of the three of the institutes were close friends and colleagues, they accepted that their students, the members which were chosen for the experimental and control group, be put in two classes, in one of the institutes, instead of being separated among the three institutes. The teacher of both classes was chosen to be the same. And all the participants had familiarity with this teacher, since they had passed courses with him during the past semesters and he was the principal of one of the institutes. The rationale behind deciding to have both classes in an institute and a same teacher was to control the effect of teacher's instruction and the effect of institute atmosphere on the learners' performance. So, 20 learners and 5 English teachers participated in the study. It should be mentioned four of the teachers only participated in the interview part, which aimed to construct the checklist.

Instrument - Ross (19) Stated that "the benefits of SA are more likely to accrue when three conditions are met: teacher and learners negotiate SA criteria, teacher-student dialogue focuses on evidence for judgments, and SAs contribute to a grade" . In addition, it could be assumed that probably the most difficult aspect of SA is to determine the criteria. Criteria are the base of evaluating learner progress;

they identify the critical aspects of a performance or a product that describes in specific terms what is involved in meeting the learning outcomes. It is necessary for the concept that the criteria are presented in operational terms with which all participants are familiar. Criteria should include information about the area to be assessed, the aims to be pursued and the standards to be reached (20). One of the flaws of the previous studies on SA was the fact that the scales used were not specified, or teachers used different criteria than learners (20). To alleviate this problem a specific checklist was designed and both teachers and learners used the same criterion for assessment process. It was developed by teachers and learners collaboratively and its design was based on the course objectives on oral performance.

When it became clear to the group that the researchers were not going to write the criteria for them, the learners of the experimental group were divided into three groups of their own preference and brainstormed ideas to identify the criteria. They were asked the question of "in your opinion, what factors are important to be considered in oral performance assessment?" For the sake of clarity, the question was delivered up to the learners in Persian, which is the official language of Iran. At the end of their discussions, they agreed on a set of criteria on which to base their assessments. On the

other hand, teachers and institute managers were interviewed on the same question which was asked from the students. Their interviews were codified, and the set of criteria on which they agreed on were diagnosed. To increase the validity of the instrument designed two actions were implemented. Elements derived from interviews with teachers and those obtained from learners' brainstorming were compared and contrasted with the elements mentioned in other checklists and rating scales in the related literature. Then the checklist was delivered up to two specialists in the TEFL field, and their suggestions for improvement were met. Finally learners' ability was decided to be assessed in four aspects of their oral performance ability including: logical development of ideas (content), linguistic, paralinguistic, and pragmatic factors based on a five point likert scale. The language section contained three subcategories named: vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. They gave themselves a 1 to 5 score for each of the six categories. The total added score for the six categories was a maximum 30.

Results

To investigate the results, the pair t- test will be used to answer the question of "is there any difference between the average of the pre- and post- test of control and experimental group?" the results are depicted in table (1).

Table 1. Pair T-test of control group's pre- and post- test

	Average	SD	Pair difference		T value	Free value	Directional P.VALUE
			Significance level at 0.05% for interval of means				
			Low limit	High limit			
Pre-and post tests	2.1	1.1005	1.31275	2.88725	-6.03	9	0

Based on the results of the data in table (1) the null hypothesis that "there is no significant difference between average of the control group's pre- and post- tests", is rejected.

Based on the results of the data in table (2) the null hypothesis that "there is no significant difference between average of the experimental group's pre-

and post- tests" is rejected. If we compare the results of the averages of the pre- and post- tests for the control and experimental groups, it is evident that this amount is higher for the members of the experimental group. This leads us to the conclusion that, participating in SA process has effect on learners' oral performance ability.

Table 2. Pair T-test of experimental group's pre- and post- test

	Average	SD	Pair difference		T value	Free value	Directional P.VALUE
			Significance level at 0.05% for interval of means				
			Low limit	High limit			
Pre- and post-tests	6.6	2.91357	4.51576	8.68424	-7.163	9	0

For further and more accurate investigation of this statement, like the case for the first null hypothesis,

inferential analysis will be provided. Here, to compare the differences between the averages of

pre- and post- tests of the experimental and control groups, the T- test formula will be used. The result of the analysis is depicted in table (3). As it is evident in both cases, when the variances are equivalent and when they are not, the amount of P. VALUE is less than 0.05. This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis "there is no relationship

between learners' participation in SA process and their level of oral performance ability". Based on the results of the data presented in the tables (2) and (F3) it could be concluded that participation in SA process has positive effect on the level of learners' oral performance ability.

Table 3. T- Test implementation for the average of pre- posttests of experimental and control group

	T value	Free value	Two way P.VALUE	Significance level at 0.05% for interval of means	
				Low limit	High limit
When the variances are equivalent	-4.569	18	0	2.43083	6.56917
When the variances are not equivalent	-4.569	11.517	.001	2.34409	6.65591

Discussion

On balance, the research evidence suggests that SA contributes to higher student achievement and improved behavior (19). McMillan & Herne (21) Stated that, although in the current era of high-stakes accountability there is considerable pressure to focus only on student performance and to minimize the extent to which SA is taught, experienced, and encouraged, SA will help learners to achieve high scores on accountability tests. It also gives learners the awareness of distinction between competence and performance (4). Through SA, learners can realize that studying languages is different from other kinds of learning at their school or university, that the prime objective is performance in the language rather than knowledge about the language (6).

The findings in the present study are specifically valuable in the Iranian context, with its long tradition of teacher-centered classes, as a step toward a more learner-centered educational system with more autonomous learners. Although for Iranian students it is difficult to be totally independent, working with their teachers in assessment realm help them move gradually toward independence. Although, with the recent emphasis in Iran on standards, and due to the poor alignment of constructivist approaches and standards, it is very difficult to harmonize formative and summative assessments, but as Sluijsmans (12) pointed out, these alternative forms of assessment should be a part of a process of change towards a student centered learning environment. This change requires a shift in emphasis from the norm-referenced to the criterion-referenced testing, from purely summative to formative and summative assessment, from external to internal evaluation, and from the assessment of product to the assessment of process as well. To take the most advantages of the

process it should be combined with the summative aspect use of the process, that teachers' formative work would not be undermined by summative pressures.

As the factors influencing any reform are in close interaction, they should be taken into account. In this regards different groups should take responsibility, some of them are mentioned below. Government is assumed to support the implementation of the policy. They are recommended to provide fund, expert personnel and other requirements in order to make the movement easier. They are also Teacher training centers (TTC), as the main sources of training teachers, are recommended to take responsibility towards training teachers with the pragmatic ability to implement the new approaches such as self- assessment. It is strongly recommended that universities, as one of the major sources of education, take responsibility towards providing the learners and educators with the opportunity to get informed about the new trends in the era. It also seems wise and necessary to provide them the opportunity to practice such new methods and trends in their actual situations to benefit the maximum from its implementations (22).

Conclusion

Finally, the researchers hope the present study will be useful to those involved in the domain of language teaching to help students develop techniques for their own learning. There should be teachers' training sessions that give them the insight to trust the accuracy of learners' SA. The development of the field of Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) in Iran provided the opportunity of more training for in-service teacher. This will make the introduction and training of new

ideas such as SA easier. Considering the small number and narrow range of the participants, the results presented in this study need to be interpreted with caution. In the future work, the use of broader range of participants is recommended. As far as SA is concerned, once again there is the need to bear in mind that the present study involved learners from an English class with very little experience in being autonomous learners. The task of SA was thus a novelty to them. Another point which was needed to be investigated, but was not in this research, was the nature of the feedback given to the participants. Also it was not possible to have two teachers as the raters of the participants' performances. The existence of two or more raters and computing inter reliability among the results of their assessments will provide more valid results about learners' performances. Since the positive effects of SA on oral performance skill was found in this research, methods of teaching and material development in language classes should be designed in such a way that encourages its implementation. It is also suggested that the effect of SA on the learners' other language skills (reading,

writing and listening) be investigated. Another line of research can be devoted to the investigation of the effect of the learners' personality traits (confidence, motivation, self-esteem, extroversion, introversion etc.) on their SAs. Gender differences and its effect on SA can be an interesting topic to be investigated, too. Also the importance of students' level of proficiency and its effect on SA should be born in mind. It is wise to conduct research that compares the results of different groups of learners' SA with different levels of proficiency. Another point to bear in mind is the investigation of the effect of feedback on learners' SAs. And also investigation of what type of feedback is more suitable for the SA process implementation. As the concept of self- and peer-assessment seems to have the same theoretical background and the same purpose, the present researchers suggest the co-implementation of these processes in language learning context. It will also be beneficial to compare the amount of their effects on learners' ability, to introduce learners with the methods which benefit them the best.

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