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On the Impact of Self-assessment Practice on Writing Skill

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the incorporation of self-assessment in writing and its influence on improving writing skill. Forty-one Iranian female EFL learners participated in the study. Before starting the treatment learners had no idea of assessing their own writings and the task of assessment was done by the teacher like most of traditional classes. At the beginning of the treatment learners were asked to write a piece of writing and assess it. They were not instructed how to do that. The criteria for assessing writing and modeling it were practiced in the following session. For four successive weeks four pieces of writing were written and given marks by the learners based on the discussed criteria and the teacher corrected their writings and gave her own marks. The data were collected through self-assessment questionnaire administered to them before and after the treatment and learners' and the teacher's marks on writings. The data were analyzed by paired t-test in order to compare the test results before and after the treatment. A repeated measure of ANOVA compared students and the teacher's marks. The results of the analyses of the repeated measure showed students' writing skill improved gradually in the treatment period. The interviews with some of the learners and the teacher confirmed that learners and the teacher had positive attitude towards self-assessment.

Keywords: self-assessment; EFL learners; writin

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1. Introduction

Among the four skills in language learning, writing has gained much interest recently due to the need of communication from different points and geographical spots of the globe. Writing, like all the other skills, is taught and practiced from the very beginning levels and it must be rated and assessed. However, this assessment is usually done by teachers. Learners usually have no idea of their place in writing skill and cannot evaluate themselves. That is because they have never been put in the situation. Many of them are not able to accurately assess their own performance (Bjork, 1994, 1999). As a consequence, they will not be able to ultimately regulate their learning process, that is, they will be always dependent on the teachers and cannot do activities that help them improve their performance.

Self- assessment, that is, the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses and points for improvement in one's own performance, has attracted considerable attention from researchers (Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Graham and Harris, 1993; Boud, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). In its narrowest sense, self-assessment in writing indicates any method or incorporation of any activity that causes writers think about, evaluate and revise their writing. By doing so, the writer both improves the piece of writing in hand and gets the skills for later use. This process includes all the exercises one can do to encourage reflection for further improvement. In order to help learners to self- assess, one also needs to be able to monitor the performance- process, because not only the end- product is important, but also the process by which it was obtained (see e.g., Segers, Dochy, & Cascallar, 2003). Furthermore, one needs to know the criteria and standards to which performance should be compared (Miller, 2003). To the knowledge of the researcher very few studies can be found in the literature on the effect of self-assessment on writing skill to date. To test the many theories of the effect of self-assessment on student writing outcomes, additional studies of self-assessment practices using experimental methods should be conducted to fill this gap. The present study attempted to create opportunities for the learners to involve in the assessment process and practice it under the teacher's supervision to achieve the mentioned goals. This paper endeavored to contribute to this growing body of research by shedding light on the effect of introducing and practicing self-assessment in writing and its effect on writing skill. In order to gain this purpose, the article seeks the answer to the following question:

Does self-assessment help EFL learners improve their writing skill?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Forty-one female teen-aged students in four classes in the intermediate level participated in the present study in a private institute in the city of Tehran, Iran in the autumn semester in 2012. The average age of the learners was 17. The same teacher conducted the study in all of the four classes. Class size ranged from 10 to 12 students. Learners had three 90-minute sessions in a week and the task of writing was a part of their assignment.

2.2. Instrumentation

For the purpose of investigating the role of self-assessment on learners' writing skill and its probable improvement, a questionnaire of self-assessment was administered to the students before and after the treatment. This questionnaire was a part of ESLP 182 Questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 106 Likert-type scale questions that addressed multiple dimensions related to the students' self-assessment. Grammar, Punctuation, and Mechanics Skills; General Writing Strategies; Before writing; During writing; After writing; Grammar, Punctuation, and Mechanics Strategies; General Learning Strategies were the components of the questionnaire which participants were demanded to rate their abilities for each item on a Likert-type scale between 1 to 5 ranging from never or almost never true to always or almost always true of them. ESL Composition Profile: Essay Rubric was used as a rubric for helping the learners to evaluate a piece of writing and following that to assess their own writings.

2.3. Procedure

Like the majority of EFL learners in Iran, the participants did not have the experience of self-assessment before.

The goal of the study was to enable the learners to assess their own writings and examine its effect on writing skill.

In order to reach the objectives of the study, a treatment was done. At the beginning of the experiment, learners were given the self-assessment questionnaire and were asked to fill in it without any information about the concept of self-assessment. Afterwards, they were demanded to write a piece of writing and assess it. In this phase learners had no idea about how to assess their writing. This was done to be the benchmark for the following writings. Then the teacher gave them her own marks. In the following session, the criteria for assessing writing and the procedure were taught and practiced with them. Some writings were assessed by the teacher focusing on the language, content, mechanics, organization and vocabulary used in the writing and decided on its rate based on the rubrics. They practiced this by assessing some writings as examples under the teacher's guidance. Afterwards, learners were asked to write a piece of writing at home for their homework and assess it according to the given criteria. In the following session, the teacher gave her marks to their writings. This process continued for four weeks and learners' marks were at the top of the page, while there was that of the teacher in a different color beside it, later. And finally, the mentioned questionnaire was given to them again so as to probe the probable changes in their views. At the end of the experiment, the researcher interviewed with some of the participants and the teacher to be informed of their views and feeling towards the experiment.

3. Results and Discussion

Due to the level of the learners 106 items were selected from ESLP 182 Questionnaire of self-assessment. Cornbach's Alpha was used to find the reliability of the whole questionnaire and each component. A summary of the findings is shown in the following table.

Table 1. Reliability of the components of the questionnaire

Component	Cronbach's Alpha
Grammar, punctuation, Mechanics Skills	0.9069
General Writing Strategies	0.6609
Before Writing	0.7643
During Writing	0.8076
After Writing	0.8630
Grammar, Punctuation, and Mechanics Strategies	0.7289
General Writing Strategies	0.8878
Total Self-assessment	0.9508

As we can see in the table 1, the total reliability of the self-assessment questionnaire is 0.95 and each component's reliability is shown in detail as well. As the reliability of $0 < \rho > 1$ is considered reliable, the whole questionnaire is considered reliable.

Table 2 displays the mean, the standard deviation and the P-value of all the components of the self-assessment questionnaire before and after the treatment. As the results show, the mean of all components has increased after the treatment with a reasonable standard deviation. This means that treatment has been fruitful in all parts of the self-assessment components. Looking at the probability value of all the components of self-assessment questionnaire before and after the treatment, we get that it is less than 0.05. Thus, the incorporation of the treatment in the current study was found to have a significant role in learners' assumption of self-assessment before and after the treatment.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, and P-value

Component	Before (Mean ± Std. Dev.)	After (Mean ± Std. Dev.)	P-Value
Grammar, Punctuation, Mechanics Skills	3.45 ± .54	3.64 ± .65	0.0506
General Writing Strategies	3.19 ± .57	3.52 ± .69	0.0004
Before Writing	3.16 ± .59	3.45 ± .71	0.0075
During Writing	3.28 ± .57	3.48 ± .63	0.0438
After Writing	2.99 ± .68	3.27 ± .82	0.0084
Grammar, Punctuation, and Mechanics Strategies	3.04 ± .63	3.44 ± .75	0.0005
General Learning Strategies	3.21 ± .58	3.50 ± .67	0.0033
Self-regulatory Capacity	3.13 ± .55	3.65 ± .70	0.0000

The next tables, tables 3 and 4 indicate the correlation and the p-value of the components of the questionnaire before and after the treatment.

Table3. Correlation & P-value of components before treatment

	Grammar, Punctuation, Mechanics Skills	General Writing Strategies	Before Writing	During Writing	After Writing	Grammar, Punctuation, & Mechanics Strategies	General Learning Strategies
Grammar, Punctuation, Mechanics Skills		0.4530 (0.0029)	0.4903 (0.0011)	0.6235 (0.0000)	0.4523 (0.0011)	0.4995 (0.0009)	0.4328 (0.0047)
General Writing Strategies			0.5215 (0.0005)	0.6054 (0.0000)	0.5177 (0.0005)	0.4070 (0.0083)	0.4609 (0.0024)
Before Writing				0.5647 (0.0001)	0.6594 (0.0000)	0.6185 (0.000)	0.6388 (0.0000)
During Writing					0.6003 (0.0000)	0.6253 (0.0000)	0.6058 (0.0000)
After Writing						0.7389 (0.0000)	0.5439 (0.0002)
Grammar, Punctuation, & Mechanics Strategies							0.7353 (0.0000)

Table4. Correlation & P-value of components after treatment

	Grammar, Punctuation, Mechanics Skills	General Writing Strategies	Before Writing	During Writing	After Writing	Grammar, Punctuation, & Mechanics Strategies	General Learning Strategies
Grammar, Punctuation, Mechanics Skills		0.6831 (0.0000)	0.6789 (0.0000)	0.7591 (0.0000)	0.4710 (0.0019)	0.5577 (0.0002)	0.6220 (0.0000)
General Writing Strategies			0.7236 (0.0000)	0.6724 (0.0000)	0.7009 (0.0000)	0.7107 (0.0000)	0.7605 (0.0000)
Before Writing				0.7729 (0.0000)	0.7788 (0.0000)	0.7658 (0.0000)	0.8248 (0.0000)
During Writing					0.5927 (0.0000)	0.5721 (0.0001)	0.6996 (0.0000)
After Writing						0.8312 (0.0000)	0.7498 (0.0000)
Grammar, Punctuation, & Mechanics Strategies							0.7623 (0.0000)

In order to answer the question of the study, a repeated measure of ANOVA of writing marks by the students and the teacher is shown in table 5. As it is obvious from time 1 to time 5 the marks are being closer to each other with an increase in the marks in the last time. Thus it indicates the improvement of students not only in assessment ability, but also in writing ability.

Table 5. Repeated measure of ANOVA of writing marks

	Time 1	Time 2	Time3	Time 4	Time 5
Student	7.7	7.8	8.15	8.24	8.31
Teacher	8.31	8.21	8.53	8.53	8.57

Figure 1 shows this improvement clearly. As the lines indicate, in time 1 the teacher and learners' marks are diverged and gradually they converged during the passing time and the movement is increasing. It implies learners' progress in writing skill after incorporation of self-assessment.
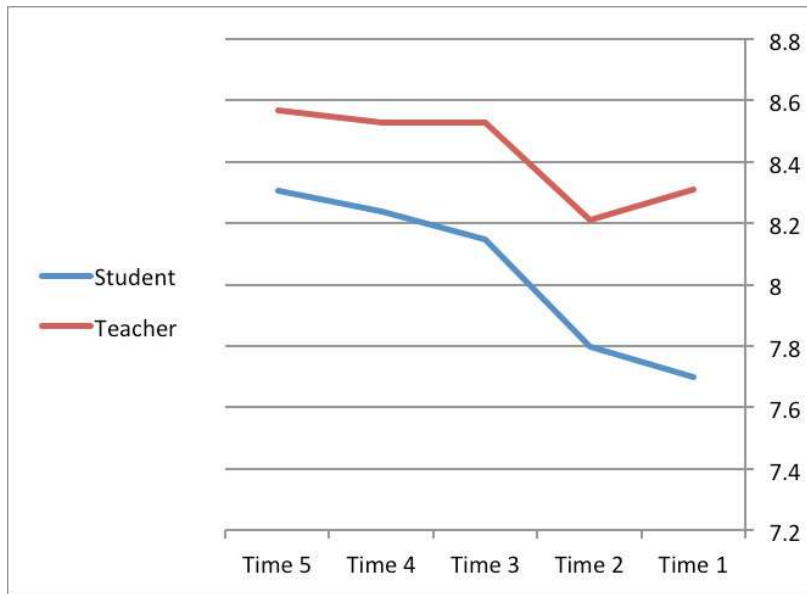
Fig.1. repeated measure of ANOVA of the teacher & learners' marks

4.Conclusion & Implications

Self-assessment methods introduce meaningful ways to nurture student writing achievement through reflection and analysis. Self-assessment includes a wide range of practices and varied terminology. Inclusion of self-assessment methods in the assessment of writing is likely to foster growth in student writing ability and transfer to future writing tasks. In addition, numerous theoretical models support self-assessment's benefits to writing, the development of critical thinking, and the fostering of positive learner behaviors. Research into the reliability and validity of self-assessment among ESL/EFL students has yielded mixed results. In some studies, agreement between ratings awarded by their teacher and students' self-awarded ratings has been reported (Al Fallay, 2004; Chen, 2002) or scores that students expected to get in a test and those they actually obtained (Bachman & Palmer, 1989) and suggested that students are able to assess their language proficiency accurately. The present research lends support to these claims acclaiming that there can be an agreement in learners' self-assessment and teacher assessment. However, discrepancy has also been found and reported between learners' self-ratings and ratings from other sources which are at variance with the current study (Yang, 2002; Blue, 1988, 1994; Wangsotorn, 1981). Despite the contradictory findings in different researches, something is tenable and justifiable that practice, support, and experience are key elements to increase the accuracy of self-assessment (AlFallay, 2004; Hasani & Rouhollahi Moghadam, 2012; Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2000; Taras, 2001).

On the basis of the examination and analysis, this article argues for reflecting on the processes of self-correction and self-assessment so as to achieve learners' improvement in writing skill. The results suggest that self-assessment instruction has equipped learners with the knowledge of how to plan and revise their essays. Self-evaluation helped students to evaluate the progress of their writing and the ability of writing, as well.

The teacher's and the learners' answers to the interview reflected the agreed criteria. They noted progress in language and delivery at the end of experiment. Students claimed that they felt comfortable about self-assessment and performed the task honestly and fairly, and that the assessment task was hard but good, making them independent, think more and learn more. The teacher focused on the usefulness of self-assessment and involvement of students in assessment task. Self-assessment was overall considered beneficial for learning and feedback critical and valuable for improvement in writing, as well.

Doing this research has let us to find ways of using SA more dramatically and properly with our learners and we hope it also provides other teachers with ideas they can use in improving the SA skills of their learners. Though it is difficult to generalize the results due to the limited number of students and the data, this study provided evidence and support for the beneficent of utilizing self-assessment in writing improvement.

Even though the findings from the data, the interviews as well as the face-to-face consultations with the teacher indicate learners' positive perceptions towards the effectiveness of the self-assessment on writing, we cannot claim that Iranian EFL learners are ready to be involved in self-assessment. It seems to be very difficult for Iranian students, who get used to traditional assessment rather than self-assessment and have little opportunity to experience this type of self-evaluation program, to adjust and adapt themselves to this relatively new testing methodology. However, the results of this study are promising and suggest that it is valuable to continue encouraging students to adopt a more active and independent role in testing process. It is recommended that what we do need are not only more learner training packages for the students but also formal training for teachers in facilitating independent learning.

Helping the learners become conscious and attentive regarding their achievement at any time period given and also reach the point of learning enhancement is an indispensable reason for self-assessment. By doing so, the learners become more capable of monitoring their own learning process. Furthermore, they are involved in the process of assessing their own writing and therefore more conscious of their problems they have made and they will not be considered as passive learners.

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