Self Assessment and Learner Autonomy

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Abstract—The study was an endeavor to investigate the impact of self and peer assessment on learner autonomy and its dimensions as well as language proficiency. It also aimed at finding the students attitude toward practicing the technique. The study enjoyed a quasi-experimental pretest post test design. To meet the objectives, 49 intermediate participants were assigned to a control (25 participants) and an experimental group (24 participants). Students proficiencies were investigated in both pretest and post test using the same versions of PET. Students' level of autonomy was also studied in both pre-test and post-test utilizing a multidimensional learner autonomy questionnaire. Self-assessment was utilized over a three-month period in 25 sessions. T-test analysis of the results of the post test proficiency test revealed no impact of the technique on language proficiency. Although the t-tests run to analyze the different dimensions of the questionnaire showed the improvement in just three dimensions of learner autonomy, an improvement in learner autonomy in general was indicated. To study the participants' attitudes toward self assessing themselves, the researcher asked the participants to write about their experience. The content analysis of the participants written experts indicated their positive attitudes toward using the technique.

Index Terms—self assessment, learner autonomy, attitude

I. INTRODUCTION

In some educational systems, self-access and autonomy practice is rarely of any concern and the practice of learner autonomy seems to be more applicable in western cultures where the whole idea originated. It is generally agreed today that learner autonomy is strange to learners in non-western cultures. There is convincing evidence, however, to assume learner autonomy as a psychological phenomenon that can go beyond cultural difference, though learning behavior is inevitably under culture influence (Aoki & Smith, 1999). Interestingly, in systems where self-access and autonomous learning is not embedded in a syllabus, the teacher can provide learners with some kind of advisory service: learner counseling, for example, is central to the self-access literature (Lit Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund, 1997). There are also some other ways of cultivating learner autonomy such as; strategy training, self assessment, journals, distance learning and learning diaries which can be used in any context to empower the learners and develop their self-access and independency.

Traditionally, curricula have tended to focus on imparting knowledge and skills rather than the teaching of how to learn. In language teaching, we have focused on teaching linguistic forms by presenting the language items in carefully graded steps, at the expense of teaching people how to learn the language (Olivareas, 2002). However, the main issue is that the differences between students are not because of their studying specific books, having the same teachers, employing identical learning styles, or experiences, but because of the ways they have find out about how to learn a language more economically and productively. In fact, the most successful learners are the ones who take the responsibility of their own learning.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Benson (2009), the idea of autonomy is not original to language teaching and learning. Rather, it is an imported and non-linguistic concept that has been brought into language teaching, via psychology and educational theory, from the field of philosophy. For much of the 20th century, however, language teaching theories and methodologies were largely grounded in theoretical and applied linguistics. It was only in the 1960s that theories with a greater focus on learners and learning came into the field and a concept like learner autonomy started to attract the attention of the researchers in the field.

Gremmo (1995, p. 152) also identifies some factors which contribute to the boost given to learner autonomy including minority rights movements, a reaction against behaviorism in medicine, politics, music, and so on, the emergence of "autonomy" as an educational goal, technology development, the rise internationalism since the second World War, adult learners and different learning needs, commercialization of much language provisions, growing school and university populations, and the development of new educational systems to dealing with large numbers of learners (Finch, 2002).

Interest in the idea of autonomy has grown largely since then and it has been associated with various forms of practice including individualized learning, self-instruction, self-access, computer-assisted language learning, distance learning, learner training and strategy training, collaborative learning, project work and the process or negotiated

syllabus that is, practices viewed as being supportive of the goal of autonomy and closely connected to the deconstruction of the traditional language classroom in the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, however, autonomy has been presented as a more general goal equally applicable to more conventional classroom situations.

Several arguments have been used for substantiating the merits of developing language learners' autonomy: Benson (2001) sees it as a human right, Naiman et. al. (1978) asserts that autonomous learning is more productive than other approaches to learning, and Waite (1994) argues that learners need to take the responsibility of their own learning endeavor so that they can make the most of available resources, especially outside the context of classroom. Learner autonomy is mostly seen as a significant educational goal, and the link between learner autonomy and effective learning has led to various pedagogical attempts in a wide variety of contexts to foster learner autonomy (Jones, 1995).

Although many have advocated learner autonomy for many years, dealing with the idea poses two major problems. The first of these concerns the definition of autonomy, or perhaps more accurately the meanings that are currently being attached to it. Little (1991, p. 4) argues that autonomy in learners can "take numerous different forms, depending on their age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be, and so on. Nation (2001, p. 394) defines autonomy by stating that "autonomous learners take control and responsibility for their own learning". According to Van Lier (1996) autonomous learners need to make significant decisions about what, how, and when to learn." Benson (2001) sees autonomy as "a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times" (Benson 2001, p. 47)

According to Lap (2005, p. 23), learners' cognitive ability or capacity, affective factors like attitudes, willingness, readiness, self-confidence, meta-cognitive strategies such as setting goals, selecting materials, planning learning activities, assessing self- progress, and social factors like willingness to work in co-operation with others are central to learner autonomy.

Accepting responsibility of one's own learning is not only a gradual development of metacognitive mastery of the learning process. Autonomy has another dimension namely self-management. The Council of Europe, for example, has used an English Language Portfolio which reflects the Council of Europe's concern with "the development of the language learner". Another tool that can be used to enhance the learners autonomy is self-assessment which Tholin (2008) defines as a natural element of autonomous learning sine it gives the learners a sense of consciousness of the learning. Gardner and Miller (1999) consider self assessment as a self monitoring device which provides learners with immediate feedback on their language proficiency and learning strategies. He even sees self assessment as tool that can increase motivation and also set some rules for the teacher in this process like raising awareness among the learners of the benefits of self assessment, providing guidance how to self assess and helping learners to understand the results. To make the learners capable of self-assessment, the teacher can take different approaches like allowing the students to work in groups in which they give and receive criticism or letting the students together evaluate some texts that they have written; the diaries that the students write in regard to what they have done while being in the class.

Traditionally, however, curricula have tended to focus on imparting knowledge and skills rather than the teaching of how to learn. However, the main issue is that the differences between students are not because of their studying specific books, having the same teachers, employing identical learning styles, or experiences, but because of the ways they have find out about how to learn a language more economically and productively. In fact, the most successful learners are the ones who take the responsibility of their own learning. And this, consequently, calls for implementing some techniques into the curriculum to enhance this feeling of responsibility in the process of language learning.

III. Research Questions

Since the study aimed at finding out the impact of practicing self-assessment technique on learner autonomy and consequently language proficiency, the following research questions will be investigated:

RQ1: Does the incorporation of self-assessment accompanied by peer-assessment improve learners' autonomy?

RQ2: Does the incorporation of self-assessment accompanied by peer-assessment improve learners' English language proficiency?

IV. Methodology

The study was a quasi- experimental one with a pretest-posttest design. Self/peer assessment was independent variables and learners' autonomy and learners' English language proficiency were the dependent variables. This study included one experimental group and a control one. The participants were 49 adult English learners, both male and female, all intermediate enrolling for the classes without knowing about the study and with an age range of 18-35. To have an appropriate sample two classes were considered as one group so that each group had 28-36 students. After administering the homogeneity test, i.e. PET, the students above and below 1.2 SD were selected. None of the candidates knew that they were part of a research project to ensure the validity of the results. The study started in the fall, 2012 and took 3 months or one semester.

The students' proficiency was measured using PET both as a homogeneity test and a post test. A learner autonomy questionnaire was also used as both a pretest and post test to measure the students' autonomy. The questionnaire

included 44 statements based on nine dimensions related to language learning (see Appendix A). The items in these nine dimensions show whether learners display a greater degree of control in a particular aspect of their learning. Table 1 below displays the nine areas to be investigated in the autonomy learner questionnaire.

The LAQ was adopted in this study because it was the most comprehensive one in terms of the number of the dimensions and therefore in terms content validity as compared to the other questionnaires available in the area of learner autonomy as confirmed by many researchers in the field (Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci, 2011; Gömleksiz, & Bozpolat, 2012; Karagöl, 2008). To tailor the questionnaire to the Iranian context, after piloting the test to 20 students, and based on the experts ideas, some items were modified or replaced. Some questionnaires administered in Iranian EFL context was also examined to find items suitable for replacing the inappropriate items (Moini & Asadi Sajed, 2012; Hashemian & Soureshjani, 2011; Nematipour, 2012; Rahnama & Zafarghandi, 2013; Maftoon, Daftarifard & Lavasani, 2011).

TABLE 1
NINE DIMENSIONS IN THE MODIFIED LEARNER AUTONOMY QUESTIONNAIRE

Section	Number of items	Focus	Questions
Dimension 1	6 items	Readiness for Self-direction	What are the learners' beliefs relating to self-directed learning in general?
Dimension 2	6 items	Independent Work in Language Learning	What are the learners' beliefs about independent work in language learning?
Dimension 3	8 items	Importance of Class/ Teacher	How important do learners see the class/ the teacher in their language learning?
Dimension 4	5 items	Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision	What importance do learners give to teacher explanation and supervision?
Dimension 5	4 items	Language Learning Activities Outside the Class	In relation to particular language learning activities, what are the learners' attitudes?
Dimension 6	3 items	Selecting Content	What are the learners' attitudes relating to the selection of content for language learning?
Dimension 7	3 items	Intrinsic motivation	How confident do learners feel about defining objectives?
Dimension 8	5 items	Assessment/ Motivation	How important is external assessment in motivating the learners' work?
Dimension 9	4 items	Interest inmOther Cultures	What are the learners' attitudes relating to the culture of other countries?

To collect the data on autonomy, the Autonomy Learner Questionnaire was administered in class with a thirty-minute allotted time period prior to the study as a pre-test and after the implementation period at the end of the twelfth week as a post-test.

The School invited all the students who have passed Top Notch Book 2B and ready to enter the Top Notch Book 3A classes (Level 7) to participate in a Preliminary English Test (PET) to ensure the homogeneity of the groups. Of course, the outliners were out of statistical considerations. Since there were 2 intermediate groups (4 classes) with 28-36 students in each group were available in the school, one of these groups served as the experimental groups and the other on as the control group and among those 28-36 students 23-25 were considered in statistical analyses since some of them were outliers and some others were absent on the exam.

Participants in the experimental group were asked to self-asses themselves and their classmates every session based on a 0-2 scale. The criteria for this self assessment were taught to ensure students knowing of how to evaluate their performance (including doing the homework, workbook and being active during the class). The teacher also evaluated the learners' performance on the same scale and since each term consists of 25 sessions, the mean of the sum of the students and teachers' given scores consist 50 of 100 scores of the whole term (To see a sample assessment form see Appendix C)

At the end of the course, the same autonomy questionnaires were given to the students to determine the possible changes. The students were also given an open-ended questionnaire about their experience practicing self assessment.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

The first Null hypothesis dealt with the impact of self assessment on learner autonomy and is stated as follows:
$H_0 4$: Self Assessment does not foster learner autonomy.

As assessment is one of the dimensions of learner autonomy, a comprehensive analysis of the dimensions seems to be more appropriate here to see whether its practice has any impacts on the dimensions other than assessment dimension.

TABLE 2
THE IMPACT OF SELF ASSESSMENT ON DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Dimensions		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
D1	Control	25	20.16	2.37	.812	47	.425
	SA	24	20.70	2.34			
D2	Control	25	18.32	1.81	.165	47	.870
	SA	24	18.46	2.26			
D3	Control	25	21.24	2.58	2.35	47	.023
	SA	24	22.95	2.51			
D4	Control	25	14.40	1.75	2.33	47	.024
	SA	24	15.62	1.90			
D5	Control	25	09.08	2.08	.348	47	.729
	SA	24	09.29	2.17			
D6	Control	25	07.40	1.52	1.67	47	.101
	SA	24	08.08	1.47			
D7	Control	25	05.40	1.97	5.04	47	.000
	SA	24	07.45	.833			
D8	control	25	13.68	2.10	3.30	47	.002
	SA	24	15.54	1.84			
D9	control	25	09.20	2.06	.823	47	.415
	SA	24	09.79	2.57			

As indicated in table 2 Self assessment doesn't seem to have any significant impact on some dimensions of learner autonomy, that is dimensions 1, 2, 5, 6 and 9. One the other hand some dimensions have been developed, examples are dimensions 3 (Importance of Class/ Teacher), 4 (role of teacher), 7 (objective/evaluation) and 8 (assessment/motivation).

To study the impact of self assessment on learner autonomy in general, another t-test was run and the result is shown in table 4.11.

TABLE 4.11
STATISTICS FOR LAQ- INDEPENDENCY LEVELS FOR SA

	VAR02	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
VAR01	Control	25	118.88	12.18	2.44	47	.019
	SA	24	127.87	13.56			

As indicated in the above table, the mean of the experimental group is higher than the control group and the Sig. which is lower than .05 (that is the alpha level) shows the positive impact of self assessment on learner autonomy.

The second hypothesis of the study is concerned with the impact of self assessment on language proficiency.

$H_0 2$: *Self Assessment does not improve on language proficiency*

To test the hypothesis PET was administered to 24 intermediate students who had been practicing self assessment for three months and the result was compared to that of the control group.

TABLE 3
STATISTICS FOR PET AS THE POST TEST IN SA GROUP

	VAR02	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
VAR01	Control	25	65.64	5.40	.207	47	.837
	SA	23	65.28	6.82			

As indicated in the table above, sig level is higher than the alpha decision level (.05) and therefore the null hypothesis can be accepted and it can be concluded that self assessment can not affect language proficiency.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Self assessment was the independent variable of the study. As with the other techniques, it developed some dimensions of learner autonomy like the importance of classroom and teacher, the role of the teacher, objective/evaluation and assessment/motivation. Of course, the fostering of these last two dimensions seems common sense, but self assessment has positive effects on the independency of the learners on teacher and classroom. It may because of the learners' change of attitude toward the role of themselves as active entities in language learning. The results of the study go in line with that of Gholami and Biria's (2014) on the impact of reflective journal writing. In that study, they found that reflective journal writing can foster some aspects of learner autonomy while not others. As Gardner and Miller (1999) discuss, self-assessment is an important tool for autonomous language learning. It can be used both as a testing device and as a device for personal self-evasluation. It provides the learner with a feedback immediately available to determine language proficiency and to reflect on learning strategies.

Interestingly self-assessment didn't develop learner's language proficiency. The findings are in contrast to those of Abolfazli and Sadeghi (2012) who claimed positive effect of self-, peer-, and teacher- assessment on Iranian undergraduate EFL students' course achievement and Vangah (2013) who found positive effects of self-assessment on reading.

Today a good assessment is not only an assessment of learning, it is also an assessment for learning. This kind of assessment contributes to the learners' growing consciousness, and enables them to go on with learning. In this way there is a clear connection between self-directed learning and assessment, and teachers should play their role by giving up the assessment to the learners.

Developing learner autonomy, however, is not a matter of one or two techniques; rather it needs a planned approach. Using the techniques discussed each its own seek although may lead to fostering autonomy but can not develop all the dimensions. It's the multidimensional model that can develop the autonomy and all its aspects. The multidimensional model can also affect the learner's proficiency which seems to be the end goal to many language teachers.

APPENDIX A. LEARNER AUTONOMY QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: ……………………..   Time of the Class:…………………….
Age: ………………………   Educational background ………………
English Experience (year): ………………………
Direction: *Please check the one closest answer to the following questions according to your true cases. Thank you very much for your help and patience.*
  5= Always True
  4= Mostly True
  3= Sometimes True
  2= Rarely True
  1= Never True

		1	2	3	4	5
1 (1)	I usually set my own goal for each semester. **INDEPENDENT**					
2(2)	I use other English books and resources on my own will. **INDEPENDENT**					
3(1)	When I hear someone talking in English, I listen very carefully. **INDEPENDENT**					
4(1)	I want to talk in English with my family or friends. **INDEPENDENT**					
5(2)	I enjoy learning a grammatical point on my own. **INDEPENDENT**					
6(2)	While learning English, I like activities in which I can learn on my own. **INDEPENDENT**					
7(2)	I like trying new things while I am learning English. **INDEPENDENT**					
8(3)	I am afraid that I won't learn a topic if the teacher doesn't explain it in the English class. **DEPENDENT**					
9(4)	I learn better when the teacher explains something on the board. **DEPENDENT**					
10(2)	I use my own methods to learn vocabulary in English. **INDEPENDENT**					
11(3)	I feel confident when the teacher is beside me while I am learning English. **DEPENDENT**					
12(3)	I can learn English only with the help of my teacher. **DEPENDENT**					
13(3)	My teacher always has to guide me in learning English. **DEPENDENT**					
14(4)	While learning English I would like my teacher to repeat grammatical rules. **DEPENDENT**					
15(4)	I feel happy when my teacher explains very detail of English. **DEPENDENT**					
16(1)	In the future, I would like to continue learning English on my own/without a teacher. **INDEPENDENT**					
17(5)	In the English lesson I like projects where I can work with other students. **INDEPENDENT**					
18(3)	I can learn the English grammar on my own/ without needing a teacher. **INDEPENDENT**					
19(3)	If I cannot learn English in the classroom, I can learn working on my own. **INDEPENDENT**					
20(2)	I like learning English words by looking them up in a dictionary. **INDEPENDENT**					
21(4)	I like my teacher to correct my errors when I make a mistake. **DEPENDENT**					
22(4)	I want the teacher to give us the words that we are to learn. **DEPENDENT**					
23(5)	I would like to use cassettes/ video/ CD's in the foreign language, outside of the classroom. **INDEPENDENT**					
24(5)	In fact I like to listen and read in English outside of the classroom. **INDEPENDENT**					
25(6)	I would like to select the materials for my foreign language lessons. **INDEPENDENT**					
26(6)	I would like to share the responsibility of deciding what to do in the English lesson. **INDEPENDENT**					
27(3)	I know how I can learn English the best. **INDEPENDENT**					
28(1)	If I haven't learnt something in my English lesson, I am responsible for it. **INDEPENDENT**					
29(6)	I would like to choose the content of what is to be taught in the English lesson. **INDEPENDENT**					
30(8)	The teacher should give me regular test. **DEPENDENT**					
31(7)	I like English because I like it to speak English. **INDEPENDENT**					
32(1)	I know my weaknesses and go for it. **INDEPENDENT**					
33(7)	I believe that I will reach a good level in the English language. **INDEPENDENT**					
34(8)	Every time I have an assignment, the teacher should score or correct it. **DEPENDENT**					
35(2)	I think that I learn English better when I work on my own. **INDEPENDENT**					
36(3)	My language learning success depends on what I do in classroom. **INDEPENDENT**					
37(5)	I find it more useful to work with my friends than working on my own for the English lesson. **INDEPENDENT**					
38(8)	I do the English lesson activities only when my teacher is going to grade me. **DEPENDENT**					
39(8)	I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned. **INDEPENDENT**					
40(7)	I can be a fluent English speaker in future. **DEPENDENT**					
41(9)	I try to understand the jokes and riddles of the foreign language. **INDEPENDENT**					
42(9)	I also investigate the culture of the foreign language I am learning. **INDEPENDENT**					
43(9)	I also investigate the idioms and sayings of the foreign language I am learning. **INDEPENDENT**					
44(9)	I ask people who have lived abroad about the lifestyles of the people living there. **INDEPENDENT**					

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