The Effects of Self- and Peer-assessment on Iranian EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing Performance

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Abstract—**Alternative assessments have increasingly gained attention in L2 writing. One of the areas of research which has received much attention in the literature of ELT is the use of self- and peer-assessments and their effects on developing the writing ability of ESL/EFL learners. The purpose of this study was to find the effect of self- and peer-assessments on the argumentative writing performance of intermediate Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, 36 intermediate EFL students were selected and homogenized based on the results of Oxford Quick Placement Test and an argumentative writing which served as the pre-test of this study. They were then randomly assigned into control and experimental groups to receive different treatments. The compositions of participants in the control group were assessed using traditional teacher-assessment while for the experimental group, self- and peer-assessments were used writing assessment. The results of post-test indicated that the use of self- and peer-assessments significantly affected the writing ability of the learners. Based on the obtained results, it was concluded that using alternative assessments for Iranian EFL students could be helpful in overcoming some of their argumentative writing difficulties. The results of this study have clear implications for both learners and teachers and other stakeholders of ELT. They can use these alternative assessments as a learning opportunity to lower the anxiety and improve the argumentative writing skill of the students.**

Index Terms—**argumentative writing, assessment, alternative assessment, self-assessment, peer-assessment**

I. INTRODUCTION

Toulmin (2006) defines argumentation as the informal reasoning skillfulness that is included in claiming and supporting these claims. According to Toulmin (2006), unlike merely trying to persuade someone to accept something as true, argumentative writing involves making a claim supported by explanations or confirmation from numerous bases that attach to the claim. This structuralist or formalist observation of argumentative writing is successful in presenting patterns of writing for encouraging the argumentative schemas into learners' mentality (Reznitskaya & Anderson, 2002). Nevertheless, such a viewpoint, particularly when it eliminates other viewpoints, has its own constraints as well (Prior, 2005). Formalist notions of argumentation are necessary but insufficient for analyzing the complex argumentative social practices in specific literacy events, given the limited language capacity as well as the limited life experience of foreign language learners. Discussions of the complexity of argumentative writing must consider argumentation as social practices with a diversity of application (Prior, 2005).

In argumentative writing, the writer tries to persuade readers to be in agreement with the writer's facts and values, believe in the arguments and conclusions, and approve the writer's position. Moreover, the author not only provides facts but also offers an argument with supporting or opposing ideas of an argumentative issue. The writer should clearly state his/her viewpoint and must show that he/she is trying to persuade the reader to acknowledge the writer's attitudes or manners. According to Marandi (2002), even though no one disregards the value of writing skill in academic contexts, EFL learners mostly find writing a more challenging skill to master than oral skills. Thus, extensive teaching of writing is necessary and learners should practice different genres of writing, including, the argumentative writing.

In line with new developments in language teaching and assessment which try to increase learner autonomy, self-assessment and peer-assessment are gaining momentum and playing more significant role in language teaching. They are procedures which give the learners a chance to judge their own learning. Students need to know their own capabilities and how much improvement they are making and what they can do with the abilities they have achieved. As far as education is concerned, students' awareness of their own performance is really important. If they can do this precisely enough, they are not obliged to depend on the teachers' opinions. Furthermore, learners can inform teachers

about their own individual requirements. According to Heinelman (1990), learners themselves are completely aware of their own knowledge while any kind of tests can only assess a small portion of their knowledge. Based on this ground, use of self-report measures has been increasingly used in recent years.

Chen (2008, cited in Javaherbakhsh, 2010) stated that teachers have to provide their students with necessary support to construct knowledge through active engagement in assessing their proficiency level and enabling them to get control of their own learning. Therefore, teachers must provide chances for learners to evaluate themselves (Oskarson, 1989) and creating autonomy in the learners will not come close to reality unless the learners are given opportunities to assess and evaluate themselves (Hunt, J., Gow, L., & Bames, P., 1989).

In all its forms, peer-assessment has become increasingly popular in education. As a learning tool, assessing their peers can provide students with skills to form judgments about what constitutes high-quality work (Topping, 1998). By means of peer-assessment, teachers can have a more accurate picture of individual performance in group work (Cheng & Warren, 2000, cited in Zundert et al, 2010).

Self- and peer-assessment can prepare pupils for effectiveness and improvement in their lives. They are also connected to the purpose of life-long learning and integrated into different subjects and fields (Chen, 2008). Consequently, there is a vital need to make a simultaneous analysis of the impact of self and peer-assessment of writing performance of Iranian EFL students as there hasn't been any adequate and comprehensive research in this field in our country so far.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Erwin (1991) assessment is termed as a continuous process of learning and development. Assessment is an approach which makes it possible to gather information and make inferences about the learners' potentials or the quality or success of teaching according to the different sources of the learners' performance. Assessment can be carried out in various forms such as, test, interview, questionnaire, observation, etc. for example it seems important to assess the comprehension ability of a learner to comprehend if the learner can follow a course of study in a school, or extra instruction is needed.

Many researchers have recognized this fact that alternative assessment techniques are efficient and dynamic means of assessing learners' educational development. Alternative assessment includes procedures and techniques which facilitate the process of instruction and are easily incorporated into daily activities of the students (Hamayan, 1995) It is specially efficient in ESL/EFL contexts in which students can demonstrate what they can produce rather than what they can remember and recall (Huerta-Macias, 1995). Alternative assessment is intended to gather information about how students are able to process and complete real-life tasks (Huerta, 1995). Self-assessment is a process through which students learn about themselves (Dikel, 2005). Put it another way, a good language learner controls his own speech and that of others, too. That is, they are paying attention to how well his words are being perceived and if his performance meets the standards he has already learned (Rubin, 1975).

Since the emergence of alternative assessment methods, many researchers have attempted to probe into the efficiency of implementing new methods of assessing language learning of different learners. Ross (1998) has studied the effect of using formative assessment on foreign language proficiency development through involving eight cohorts of foreign language learners in an eight-year longitudinal study. He found that formative assessment procedures proved very positive effects on language proficiency development. Cheng and Warren (2005) have attempted to study the advantages of peer-assessment in English language programs. In their research, undergraduate engineering students attending a university in Hong Kong were asked to assess the English language proficiency of their peers. They also attempted to compare peer and teacher assessments. The results of their studies yielded that the students had a negative perception of assessing their peers' language proficiency, but they could score their peers' language proficiency in a similar fashion based on the same assessment criteria. Implementing two techniques of self-assessment and conferencing, Firooz-Zareh (2006) investigated the relationship between alternative assessment techniques and Iranian learners' reading proficiency. The results of his research proved that alternative assessment techniques should be incorporated into instruction and assessment programs. Besharati (2004) did a similar research but focusing on the impact of alternative assessment on listening proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. His study produced similar outcomes which necessitates the implementation of peer and self-assessment techniques.

As for speaking ability, Ahangari, Rassekh-Alqol, and Ali Akbari (2013) examined the effect of peer assessment on oral presentation of Iranian EFL students. They obtained data through a Likert scale questionnaire of peer assessment. The results of their study specified a statistically significant difference among the groups. The findings of their study also suggested that peer-assessment can enhance the speaking ability of learners if they are given a valid criterion or framework.

Moreover, Ariafar and Fatemipour (2013) investigated the effect of self-assessment on the speaking skill of pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. The results of their study revealed that self-assessment practices helped the participants of the study to improve their speaking ability. Moreover, the authors found that the participants thought positively about the use of self-assessment and showed their willingness to continue using self-assessment.

As for general course achievement, Abolfazli Khonbi and Sadeghi (2012) investigated the effect of self-, peer-, and teacher-assessment techniques on Iranian EFL learners' general English proficiency. The results of their study indicated

differences in the effect of the three techniques in favor of peer-assessment. As for the effect of alternative assessments in writing skill, Javaherbakhsh (2010) investigated whether self-assessment impacts Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. The results of his study indicated that self-assessment significantly affected the writing ability of the students. Meihami and Varmaghani (2013) also investigated the use of self-assessment in EFL writing classroom. The results of their analysis showed that self-assessment significantly improved the writing proficiency of the participants. Their results confirmed that self-assessment is successful with EFL students.

The relationship between self-assessment and motivation was also examined in the context of Iran. Birjandi and Hadidi Tamjid (2010) examined the effect of self-assessment in promoting Iranian EFL learners' motivation. Journal writing was used as the self-assessment technique for the experimental group was. The results of their study revealed that a regular use of journal writing can promote the learners' motivation. Many studies have tried to find the effect of using alternative assessments in L1 and L2 instruction (see Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Liang, 2006; Matsuno, 2009). However, the simultaneous effect of self and peer-assessment in EFL students' argumentative writing performance has not been explored in the context of Iran.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

The present study was motivated by the following research questions:
- Do self- and peer-assessment techniques significantly affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' argumentative writing performance?

A. Participants

To conduct the study, 54 EFL students were selected based on convenience sampling method from Hakim Jorjani Institute of Higher education, Gorgan, Iran. They were male and female students ranging from 18-25 years of age and Persian was their mother tongue. Among that sample, 45 intermediate participants were singled out based on the results of Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004). They were then homogenized in terms of their writing ability after administering a pre-test. Finally, 36 intermediate EFL students (in terms of proficiency and writing ability) were used as the participants of this study who were then randomly assigned to control and experimental groups.

B. Procedures

In order to answer the main research questions, the following procedures were conducted. First, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered to 70 EFL students to make sure that all the participants were at the same level of proficiency i.e., intermediate level. Then, those who got 30-40, were selected as the subjects of the study. Then, the subjects were given and asked to compose a five-paragraph argumentative essay on the topic (death penalty for people who kill other people, fair or unfair?), in about 30 minutes, to determine their argumentative writing proficiency level. In the next phase, the selected participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups.

In the treatment phase, in both groups, every three sessions, the subjects were given a topic to write an argumentative composition containing 150 words. In the control group, the traditional teacher-assessment method was used and for the experimental group, self-assessment and peer-assessment techniques were utilized. In other words, every learner's argumentative writings were assessed by the learner himself/herself or by the peer of the learner. After that, the teacher added some comments at the bottom of the checklists. But the control group did not receive any feedback during the treatment period. At the end, two composition topics were given to both control and experimental groups as the posttest. Finally, their writing performances were compared using the writing scoring checklist which includes five criteria based on which the writings of the students were scored. The criteria include organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), logical development (content), structure; mechanics; style and quality of expression. These features were also used by the students on a five-point Likert scale to assess their peers' writing performance. The teacher also provided them with feedback at the bottom of the checklist. The scoring was done based on ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et al. (1981). It focuses on the writing components namely, content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

C. Data Analyses

After the assumptions of normality were met, independent-samples t-test was run for the post-test to find if there was any significant difference between the two groups after treatment. In order to see the progress of each group, a paired-samples t-test was also run. To do so, the mean score of each group before and after the treatment was compared.

IV. RESULTS

A. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive results of participants' performance on pretest and posttest are shown in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, the scores of the participants range from 10 to 16 with a mean of 12.77 in pretest while the mean is slightly more for posttest (M = 13.88) and the scores range from 11 to 17.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR EACH TEST

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance
pretest	36	10.00	16.00	12.7778	1.65807	2.749
posttest	36	11.00	17.00	13.8889	1.63494	2.673

B. Categorizing the Participants into Control and Experimental

As mentioned above, the proficiency level of the participants was determined by means of Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004). A pretest was also administered to ensure the homogeneity of the students in terms of their argumentative writing performance. Afterwards, the participants were randomly assigned into control and experimental groups based on the results of pretest. An independent-samples t-test was run to ensure that there were not any significant differences between the scores of the participants in control and experimental groups on posttest.

TABLE 2
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FOR PRETEST

	group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Pretest	control	18	13.1111	1.93691	.45653
	experimental	18	12.4444	1.29352	.30489

TABLE 3
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS FOR PRETEST

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
pretest	Equal variances assumed	5.306	.027	1.214	34	.233
	Equal variances not assumed			1.214	29.648	.234

The descriptive results of independent-samples t-test, as shown in Table 2, indicated that there was a small difference between the means of the control and experimental groups in pretest. Since the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances shows that the variances of the two groups are not equal ($p < .05$), the second line of Table 3 is reported. Table 3 shows that the mean difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, $t(29.64) = 1.21$, $p > .05$. Consequently, the homogeneity of the two groups was ensured.

C. Inferential Statistics

To answer the research question of this study, two types of t-tests were run. An independent-samples t-test was run to find the difference between the performances of the two groups on posttest. Moreover, paired-samples t-tests were run to examine the development of each group from pretest to posttest.

Table 4 shows the descriptive results of independent-samples t-test for posttest. As shown in this table, there is a small difference between the means of the two groups (M = 12.77 & M = 15).

TABLE 4
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FOR POSTTEST

	group	N	Mean	SD	SE
posttest	control	18	12.7778	1.39560	.32895
	experimental	18	15.0000	.97014	.22866

Since the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances shows that the variances of the two groups are not equal ($p < .05$), the second line of Table 5 is reported. The main table of independent-samples t-test indicates that the difference between the two groups was statistically significant, $t(30.31) = 5.547$, $p < .01$. This shows that using self- and peer-assessment techniques had a positive effect on the argumentative writing performance of Iranian intermediate EFL students.

TABLE 5
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS FOR PRETEST

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
pretest	Equal variances assumed	6.641	.014	-5.547	34	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.547	30.319	.000

To find the development of each group, paired-samples t-tests were also run. The first paired-samples t-test was run for the control group and the results of Table 6 indicated that the mean difference between the pretest and posttest was not remarkable (M = 13.11 & M = 12.77).

The results of Table 7 showed that the argumentative writing performance of participants in the control group did not differ from pretest to posttest and this difference was not statistically significant, $t(17) = .678$, $p > .05$.

TABLE 6
PAIRED-SAMPLES DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FOR CONTROL GROUP

		Mean	N	SD	SE
Control	pretest	13.1111	18	1.93691	.45653
	posttest	12.7778	18	1.39560	.32895

TABLE 7
PAIRED-SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS FOR CONTROL GROUP

		Mean	SD	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	Pretest-posttest	.3333	2.0863	.4917	.678	17	.507

Another paired-samples t-test was run for the experimental group to compare the participants' argumentative writing performance before and after the treatment. The descriptive statistics showed that there was a remarkable mean difference between the argumentative writing performance of the students in the pretest and posttest (M = 12.44 & M = 15).

TABLE 8
PAIRED-SAMPLES DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FOR CONTROL GROUP

		Mean	N	SD	SE
Experimental	pretest	12.4444	18	1.2935	.3048
	posttest	15.0000	18	.9701	.2286

TABLE 9
PAIRED-SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS FOR CONTROL GROUP

		Mean	SD	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental	Pretest-posttest	-2.555	.9217	.2172	-11.762	17	.000

The main results of paired-samples t-test presented in Table 9 indicated that this difference was statistically significant, $t(17) = 11.762$, $p < .01$. The overall results of paired-samples t-test also confirmed the results of independent-samples t-test; using self- and peer-assessment techniques can significantly enhance the argumentative writing performance of intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

V. DISCUSSION

According to the results of this research, providing the opportunity for the students to use self- and peer-assessments was helpful and influential in improving their argumentative writing ability. By providing alternative assessment techniques, learners could write better compositions. The results of this study showed significant change in the experimental group; therefore, the findings can help EFL teachers who like to help students develop strategies for their own learning, to help them find their strengths and weaknesses, and to help them become more autonomous. Using self-assessment checklists also gives the teacher complete information about the students' progress and their failure in the process of learning.

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of other studies which found a positive effect for peer-evaluation on the improvement of students' writing performance (Hughes & Large, 1993; freeman, 1995; Dyer, 1996; Brown, 2001). The findings are in also in line with the study of Patri (2002) which found that when assessment criteria are set, peer-assessment can enable students to judge the writing of their peers in manner comparable to their teachers.

The self-assessment technique can play an influential role in checking the effectiveness of individual learning, enhancing their intrinsic motivation, and making them prepared for a life-long learning experience. Learners need to assess their progress and accomplishments to be able to plan for their future learning objectives. Self-assessment has proved to raise the students' self-awareness and motivation (Birjandi & HadidiTamjid, 2010). As the results of the study also revealed, self- assessment and peer-assessment techniques can be used as effective tools for enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation and improving their self-confidence. This is absolutely important in our Iranian EFL context which highly depends on the role of the teacher in teaching and evaluation. It is generally assumed that in teacher-centered classes, students are not self- confident enough. Alternative assessments, as shown in this study, can be used as effective tools in helping the learners be involved in the process of their own learning and evaluation.

However, because self-assessment is affected by complex cognitive processes and uncontrollable factors, the effectiveness of this method has been questioned (Birjandi & HadidiTamjid, 2010). Despite a number of difficulties in appropriately implementing self-assessment, resolving these problems can create effective techniques and procedures for language teaching, learning, and assessment. If such challenges are taken into account, language institutions and classroom teachers will consider the potential of self- and peer-assessments as both valid and reliable supplements to traditional assessment, and their effective roles in promoting self-directed learning.

The results of this study can be used for all stakeholders of the field. The findings suggest some implications for teacher, learners, materials writers, syllabus designers, and test developers. EFL teachers can use self-assessment techniques to make their learners more autonomous and responsible for their own learning experience. Self-assessment has been identified as a key learning strategy for autonomous language learning which enable language learners to

monitor their own learning progress. One of the most salient features of a balanced assessment is making the students involved in the evaluation process. When students become partners in the learning process, their self-image as an active decision maker improves. Alternative assessment techniques help students reflect on what and how they learn and give them the possibility to develop effective learning strategies. Materials writers are recommended to include such alternative assessment techniques in EFL textbooks to be used by teachers and learners. If such techniques are appropriately presented and planned in EFL materials and syllabi, they might not be ignored by teachers and learners. Moreover, test developers can shift from traditional test formats and move towards alternative assessments which are more compatible with learner-centered teaching methodologies. Teaching methodologies and progressive evaluation should be planned and designed based on self- and peer-assessment techniques to improve the writing performance of the students.

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