

## The Impact of Self Assessment on the Second Language Writing of Undergraduates

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**Abstract:** This study presents the findings of a classroom research carried out to investigate the effect of Self Assessment on the Second Language Writing of Undergraduates. Second language (L2) writing depends on background experience, needs, interests and purposes for writing and these aspects play a vital role in second language writing situations than in first language. Thus second language writers in the research context (The University of Jaffna) face challenges in developing writing skills. The ability to produce accurate writing needs to be developed among these undergraduates. As many of the writings are difficult to understand due to grammatical inaccuracies and incorrect organization, this study was designed to investigate a suitable technique to improve these students' L2 writing. Hence this study attempted to find out the effect Self Assessment had on students' writing. In this study, self assessment is defined as a type of autonomous feedback the learner achieves on learning progress. Twenty four third year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna who were specializing in social sciences were selected among a total population of ninety seven students. The group was treated with free writing activities, self assessment sessions and remedial steps. Students' attitude on self assessment was also investigated through a questionnaire. The results revealed that Self Assessment had a positive impact on students' writings and students revealed a positive attitude to Self assessment. The study has important implications for ESL teachers who teach writing at the University of Jaffna in particular and at other universities across the island.

**Keywords:** Autonomous Feedback, Grammatical inaccuracies, Organisation of writing, Second Language (L2) writing, Self Assessment.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Although effective writing skills are vital to the academic success of university students, second language (L2) writers face multiple challenges in developing these skills. The students in the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, though competent enough to get through the ESL examinations, are unable to use English or function in English. This observation is supported by the statement "students in all the provinces of Sri Lanka seem to have reached adequate levels of competence ... although the students possess knowledge about the language, when they are required to use it they are unable to do so" [13].

Researchers in the recent past have analyzed ways and means of improving students' writing performances. To promote the ability to write confidently in second language learning, various methodologies such as task repetition, process approach, providing corrective feedback and various other techniques have been tried out in the research area of English Language Teaching (ELT). However writing skill remains a highly complex activity in our context.

## II. OBJECTIVE

It is in this background, that the matter of how to identify an effective method of approach to improve the accuracy of writing requires greater concern. Thus, in this study, the objective is to investigate the effect of a simple form of self assessment as an instrument to promote the ESL writing ability of the undergraduates.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Let us now consider what 'self- assessment' is in the second language learning context.

Klenowski [9] defines self-assessment as the evaluation or judgment of the 'worth' of one's performance and the identification of one's strength and weaknesses with a view to improving one's learning outcomes.

As Oscarson [12] points out, "it is quite recently as a result of the increased demands for needs oriented, learner centered education, there is a growing feeling that tests ought to be integrated into the learning processes chiefly in order to provide feedback on progress to the learner, and that they ought to be controlled, where feasible, by the learners to a greater extent than is now the case".

Further, Oscarson, a well known scholar in the field of self-assessment, gives six reasons why self-assessment can be beneficial to language learning. First, it gives learners training in evaluation which results in benefits to the learning process. Secondly, students and teachers receive a raised level of awareness of perceived levels of abilities. Thirdly, it is highly motivating in terms of goals-orientation. Fourthly, a range of assessment techniques is elaborated in the classroom. Fifth, the students get opportunity to participate in their own evaluation and finally, the students benefit with post-course effects. Thus, in the process of self-assessment, the learner is viewed as an intelligent human being capable of playing an active role in his learning. The teacher takes the role of a facilitator who creates conditions to foster learner independence and improve learning strategies of the learner. Allowing the learner to monitor his/her own learning in a stress-free context is the main advantage of self-assessment. This is believed to be enhancing motivation and providing autonomous feed back. In this study too, self assessment is defined as a type of autonomous feedback the learner achieve when assessing his or her own writing.

## IV. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 4.1. Learner autonomy

Holec [8] defines autonomous learning as the process of taking charge of one's learning process. The ability of students to self educate allows the learner to become more responsible for the learning processes. This becomes extremely important in education due to the reason that the curriculum design itself focuses more on learner centeredness. Autonomous learners take an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing him or herself of opportunities rather than simply reacting to the teacher. Learning is seen as the result of one's own self initiated interaction with the world [15].

According to Thanasoulas [15], autonomous learners have seven main attributes such as having insights into their learning styles and strategies, taking an active approach to the learning task at hand, willing to take risks, guessing, attending to form as well as to content, placing importance on accuracy and appropriateness, developing the target language into a separate system and willingness to revise and reject hypotheses, having tolerance and an outgoing approach to the target language. When feedback is obtained through self-assessment, the learner becomes self activated and attentive to correct forms of the language by guessing and revising the target language and also learns to reject the inaccurate forms. Thus the theory of learner autonomy seems to indicate plausible validation for this study on self-Assessment.

#### 4.2. Noticing Hypothesis

While the theory of learner autonomy explains how learners assume greater responsibilities for and take charge of their own learning, Schmidt's theory of Noticing [14] deals with the relationship with noticing and conscious learning. The "role of noticing" and "noticing the gap" in second language acquisition has been widely debated in the general field of cognitive psychology. Empirical research has been carried out to define the theoretical constructs that underlie the role of noticing and to assess the validity of the assumption that noticing enhances language acquisition.

#### 4.3. Researchers on self-assessment

Oscarson [11], in his earlier research states that there is a growing feeling that tests ought to be integrated into the learning process mainly in order to provide feedback on progress of the learner, and that they ought to be controlled where feasible by the learners to a greater extent unlike the present case. Analyzing the reliability and validity of self-assessment, Oscarson [12] suggests that the validity of learners' judgments can in fact be quite high in self assessment. Blanche [3], too adds that a majority of students find it easier to estimate their communicative competence level than their mastery of grammar. Combe [4] in his research with subjects of EFL learners (English as a Foreign Language) argues that the learners may be able to judge their own fluency and understanding fairly accurately but may find it difficult to assess their accuracy of speech and pronunciation.

Harris [7] whose research on self-assessment was in formal setting expresses that self-assessment encourages learners to become part of the whole process of language learning and to be aware of individual progress and to know more about their own strengths and weaknesses.

Based on the above theoretical underpinning and research findings, this study attempts to investigate the impact of self-assessment on the improvement of the writing skill of the undergraduates of the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna.

### V. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

#### 5.1. Participants

The participants of this study were twenty four third year students in the faculty of Arts following ESL as an auxiliary component in the social science stream. The selection was done on the results of an initial test. This was a written test on the topic '*my first day experience at the University*'. Those who obtained 40-45 marks were selected as the sample for this study as these students were identified as being capable of writing compositions even with a lot of inaccuracies in their scripts.

## 5.2. Research Design

Duration of the study was one semester plus numerous hours of informal discussion and interviews. Intervention programme for this study includes input with free writing activities, self assessment sessions and remedial steps. Students' attitude on self assessment was investigated through a questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted questions designed in likert style with five responses in order to carry out the analysis quantitatively.

Example: I enjoy assessing my work

1. Strongly agree      2. Agree      3. 50% agree      4. Disagree      5. Strongly disagree.

The writing prompts were carefully selected to avoid complexity and to maintain uniformity. To facilitate the participants and reduce their difficulties in self-assessing themselves, they were introduced and familiarized with the marking code before the intervention steps.

Table 1: Code used to perform teacher correction

Error type	Code
Word order	wo
Verb form	vf
tense	t
article	art
pronoun	pro
preposition	prep
Subject/verb agreement	s/v
Number error	num
Negation error	neg
Spelling error	sp

(Adapted from [16] and modified)

Along with the above coding on accuracy, comments were written regarding the content and organization with the view to encapsulate most of the elements of writing.

The drafts of students' compositions on given prompts were collected and marked by the researcher using the above marking code. Coded drafts along with the marking code and a scoring guide were distributed to the students. Students assessed their drafts according to the scoring guide. This scoring guide was a common rating scale which was adapted and modified from Tribble [16]. It is user oriented and written with a focus on providing information to help users easily interpret their scores. It was a bench mark in which scores are given from bands 1-5. Self-assessment process was repeated five times. After performing self-assessment, students were requested to write self reflection on their assessment. They were permitted to write the reflections in their first language to maintain authenticity and uninhibited reflection about self awareness.

## 5.3. Method of analysis

The attitude of the students was investigated quantitatively. The students, by noticing teacher's coding and the scoring guide given, were able to assess their own writings. All the five sessions of self-assessment were recorded and analyzed qualitatively.

## VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study suggest that self assessment has a positive impact on students' ESL writing. All twenty four students significantly improved in their final drafts. Thus it reveals that self assessment has a positive impact on students' revisions. The study was conducted to investigate the impact of the self assessment strategies on one hand and to find out the effectiveness and the attitude of the students on the other. When we consider the committed errors before the intervention and after, students gradually improved. This seems to indicate that students gradually improve their errors when repeatedly undergoing self assessment as a feedback on progress. Students' attitude regarding self assessment was investigated through a questionnaire. When analyzed quantitatively, the findings showed that 82% of the students showed a strong positive attitude towards self-assessment. They revealed satisfactory remarks in their self reflection reports regarding the effect of self-assessment.

These findings also seem to support the different theoretical bases that underpin this study. As discussed earlier, Schmidt's [14] assertion that the input learners notice becomes the intake for learning becomes evidential. According to Schmidt if consciousness is indeed equivalent to the short term store, this amounts to a claim that where there is storage without commission, awareness is impossible. Thus during the comparison stage, students may have become conscious of their error commitment while comparing their original draft with the coded version. Thus, 'noticing' of errors may have led to awareness.

In addition, Holec [8] states that the ability of students to self educate allows the learner to become more responsible for the learning processes. As discussed earlier in the literature review, learner autonomy becomes extremely important in applied areas of education due to the reason that the focus of curriculum design itself has been turned towards more learner centered. Autonomous learners take an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing themselves of opportunities rather than simply reacting to various stimuli provided by the teacher.

## VII. CONCLUSION

As can be seen in the findings and from students' responses regarding self assessment, students seem to have been stimulated. This may be further accelerated if teachers negotiate with the students regarding the self assessment progress to be carried out and its features. If it is appropriately done as a continuous feedback, it may be possible to gradually increase the accuracy rate. In a learner-centered curriculum, learners are encouraged to not only be test takers, but also to be active participants in the assessment process [1, 5].

It is therefore offered as a contribution to the growing data base of research on English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka particularly teaching at the tertiary level. More useful diagnostic information could be obtained from further research into this area of study.

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