Journal of
Languages and Culture

ABOUT JLC

The **Journal of Languages and Culture (JLC)** will be published monthly (one volume per year) by Academic Journals.

Journal of Languages and Culture (JLC) is an open access journal that provides rapid publication (monthly) of articles in all areas of the subject such as Political Anthropology, Culture Change, Chinese Painting, Comparative Study of Race, Literary Criticism etc.

Contact Us

Editorial Office: jlc@academicjournals.org

Help Desk: helpdesk@academicjournals.org

Website: http://www.academicjournals.org/journal/JLC

Submit manuscript online http://ms.academicjournals.me/

Journal of Languages and Culture

ARTICLES

Research Articles

Full Length Research

Perception and practice of self-assessment in EFL writing classrooms

Medhanit Belachew, Meseret Getinet and Akililu Gashaye

Bahir Dar University, Faculty of Humanities, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.

This study investigates the perception and practice of EFL learners and students towards self-assessment. The study was conducted taking 50 second year English major students, who were selected by simple random method, as a representative sample. The study also included 10 EFL writing teachers who were selected by comprehensive sampling method. From the study, it was found that both teachers and students had positive attitude towards self-assessment in writing classrooms. Using the checklists given to them, students were made to assess their own essays for four consecutive writing sessions. It was apparent to see from this study that the majority of students overrated their written performances. In the four sessions of writing and self-assessment, the number of students who rated their written performances genuinely was always less than those who overrated themselves. It was found that students who rated themselves genuinely increased from 30% in the first phase to 40% in the fourth phase while the students who overrated their written performances decreased from 56% in the first phase to 44 % during the last session. It was found out from the study that most teachers did not have any experience of self-assessment in writing classrooms. Teachers felt that students did not have the potential to make genuine assessment of written tasks. Finally, it was recommended that teachers should be aware of self-assessment and use it in their EFL classrooms as it is vital to bring autonomous learning.

Key words: Self-assessment, autonomous learning, writing, EFL classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Education, to be successful, has to consider the type of the lesson, teachers' qualification, students' motivation and level of knowledge and the overall situation of the school. If part of those elements is not recognized very well, it will affect the process and outcome of students' learning. To check the result of these combinations, using different kinds of assessments is one mechanism.

Even better, students learning will become successful if they directly involve in their learning. In ELT classroom, for instance, learners can become more successful in acquiring the necessary skills if they take more part in their language learning process than their teachers or text books do. This leads students to be more self-accessed or autonomous learners. The high level of control over

their learning outside the classroom in addition to what they practice in the classroom enables students to be self- accessed or autonomous learners. Autonomous learning also encourages students to evaluate their level of language performance. Self–assessment develops students' motivation and level of understanding permanently (Chen, 2005). Commonly, higher education should equip students with the skills and attitudes required throughout their lives. Hence, self–assessment plays a significant role in this regard.

According to Williams (1992), if formative assessment is to be productive, students should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of learning and there by grasping what is to be achieved. Moreover, Williams (1992) stated that pupils who reflect on their learning can improve exam performance by up to two grades and positive effects of these strategies are more pronounced with less able students.

Therefore, in higher institutions like Bahir Dar University, the practice of self-assessment so as to make students successful in EFL classroom is unquestionable. Thus, this study focuses on what is going on in the EFL writing classrooms; specifically, on the perceptions and practices of EFL learners and teachers towards self-assessment.

Statement of the problem

In line with theories of self-directed learning and learner autonomy, self-assessment is assuming a larger role in language teaching nowadays. The procedure involves students in making judgments about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and learning outcomes. Many researchers and practitioners assume self-assessment as a vital part of learner autonomy and argue that teachers should provide the opportunity for students to assess their language level so as to help them focus on their own learning (Blanche, 1988; Blue, 1994; Dickinson, 1987; Harris, 1997; Oscarsson, 1998). Finch (2002) even claims that without learner self-evaluation and self-assessment, there can be no real autonomy. Oskarsson (1989) mentions six advantages of using self-assessment in the language classroom: pro-motion of learning, raised level of awareness, improved goal-orientation, expansion of range of assessment, shared assessment burden, and beneficial post-course effects. Blue (1994) also identifies benefits such as encouraging more efforts, boosting self-confidence, and facilitating awareness of the distinction between com-petence and performance as well as self-consciousness of learning strengths and weaknesses.

Blue (1994) also pointed out that self-assessment is very important to bring autonomous learning or learning independence. Though self-assessment is advocated by many individuals as a main tool to bring self-regulated learning, there is a belief that it is one of the problematic

areas (Blue, 1994). It is also widely recognized that learners might not have the necessary experience to make judgments of this sort (Oscarsson, 1998).

Research conducted on self-assessment has come with different results. Some research results such as Chen (2005) have reported the close resemblances between teacher ratings and student self-assessments. To the contrary, research results of Blue (1988), Patri (2002) and Young (2002) show that there exists a discrepancy of teachers assessment and students ratings. Despite all the contradictory results, scholars in the field argue that self-assessment can bring meaningful learning if there is adequate practice, support and experience.

The above ideas about self-assessment initiated the current researchers to know the real experiences of EFL teachers and learners at Bahir Dar University on self-assessment. Since the research works which were reviewed above are conducted in foreign classroom situation, this study helps the researchers to see the situation in Ethiopian classroom context. Thus, this study precisely focuses how self-assessment is really going on in EFL writing classrooms of Bahir Dar University thereby studying the perceptions and practice of EFL learners and teachers towards self-assessment.

Objectives of the study

The major purpose of the study is to identify the perceptions and practices of Bahir Dar University second year English majoring students towards self-assessment in their EFL writing classes. The study also explores teachers' experiences and perceptions on self-assessment, especially in their writing classrooms.

Thus, the research focusing on second year students of Bahir Dar University attempts to answer the following basic research questions.

How do EFL learners perceive self- assessment?
What kinds of perceptions do EFL writing teachers have towards self-assessment?
Do students assess themselves genuinely and rate their level of writing effectively?
What does the experience of EFL writing teachers towards self-assessment look like?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. It involves simple numerical statistics and qualitative method of data analysis. Semi-structured interview, document analysis and focus group discussions were the instruments that are used in the study.

Population of the study

The subjects of this study were second year English majoring

students who were taking advanced writing skills. Since they have taken two writing courses, the researchers believe that second year English major students are more familiar with the concepts of self-assessment than first year students. Because third year students were not taking any writing course while the study was being undertaken, they were not selected as a population of this study. The other reason for choosing such a target is two of the researchers were teaching advanced writing course for the target population. This helped the researchers to have a look intensively at the actual classroom atmosphere during writing works.

The total numbers of second year English majoring students were around 240. They were enrolled in 2002 academic year and assigned into five sections of 48 students each. From the total of 240 students, 50 students were taken as a representative sample. These students were taken as a representative sample of the study by simple random sampling method. From the total of 50 students who participated in assessing themselves, 18 students were randomly selected for focused group discussion. In addition, from the total of 27 EFL teachers who were teaching writing courses in different faculties, 10 teachers were selected by comprehensive sampling method for interview.

Instruments and procedures

The major purpose of the study is to identify the perceptions and practices of EFL learners and teachers on self-assessment in writing classrooms. In order to meet the aim of the study, interview, document analysis and focused group discussion were used.

According to Cohen et al. (2007), interview is very important in enabling the participants (interviewers or interviewees) express their views of the world deeply. Hence, interview is particularly selected because it is assumed to be relatively better to investigate the perceptions and practices of teachers towards self-assessment in writing classrooms more deeply. Thus, interview was conducted with the comprehensively selected 10 teachers who were teaching English writing courses in the university (see appendix 2). The interview conducted with teachers was semi-structured type. This is to mean that researchers planned the questions before hand, but the researchers did not stick to them too much. If the interviewees want to give more information and say more about the question that has already been asked, the researchers allow them to forward their ideas. Each interviewee was asked eight questions in order to obtain their views and beliefs regarding self-assessment practices and perceptions. Each interviewee's responses were recorded using audio-tape.

Furthermore, classroom writing assignments were parts of the study. All students were given a check-list to self assess themselves for four essay writing sessions (see appendix 1). The classroom teachers were made to collect essays written by 240 second year English major students. The check-lists filled by the target population as part of self-assessment for each essay were collected in parallel. Finally, four essays and four checklists for each of the sample population (50 students) were analyzed. The sample students were made to rate themselves as excellent, good, fair, poor and very poor. This five-leveled scoring was developed by the three researcher teachers and students collaboratively through the process of group discussion. Therefore, the class with the three teachers' assistance concluded a set of criteria for each level of scores. Before students start assessing themselves, two sessions training, observing performances and sharing comments and suggestions were made. The practice of self-assessment started after the training was completed using the same evaluation checklist. Students were made to write only their identification codes both on the checklist and essays. After students assessed and graded their essays, the three researcher teachers did the same for the target students. To check whether these fifty students are real representatives of the total population or not, randomization check was made through the pretest given to students.

Finally, focused group discussions with three groups of six students were conducted (see appendix 3). These students were selected from the fifty students who rated their essays for four days. For each of the groups participated in the focused group discussion, researchers spent 40 min. Hence, a total of two hours discussion was conducted with the three groups. One of the researchers among the three acted as moderator of the group discussion. The ideas raised from the participants were also recorded. The focused group discussion helped the researchers to get detail information about perceptions, practices, and problems of self-assessment in writing classrooms.

The content and face validity of the interview and focused group discussion questions were checked through suggestions from senior colleagues. The reliability of the items was also checked in the form of pilot study.

Data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were used. The data collected through interview and focused group discussions were analyzed qualitatively. The information gathered from document analysis was analyzed using simple statistics which involves raw figures and percentage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to identify the perceptions and practices of self-assessment in EFL classrooms, the researchers collected data from students' essays, interviews and focused group discussions. The data collected using these instruments are presented and analyzed in this section.

The data collected from students' written assignments are dealt first with in this section. Next, the information gained from interview with EFL teachers is presented and analyzed. The data gained from focused group discussions are treated last.

Findings from document analysis

The written assignments were collected along with the checklists filled by the fifty sample students as part of self-assessment. In order to check whether students grade their writing skills genuinely or not, students were made to rate four consecutive essays as excellent, good, fair, poor and very poor using checklists given to them. Students' self ratings are presented in Tables 1-4. Table 5 also gives a summary of self-assessment procedures for the total sessions.

As shown in Table 5, 56% of the students tended to overrate their written tasks in the first cycle of self-assessment. In the first cycle of self-assessment, 28 (56 %) students overrated their writing assignments. In this cycle, 30% of students out of the total 50 participants rated their papers genuinely. This means only the papers of 15 students were similar with the ratings of the three researcher teachers. On the other hand, 7(14%) of the participants gave lower marks than they actually deserve.

In the second cycle of students' self-assessment, half

Table 1. First cycle student's self-assessments.

Rating	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Total	Percent
Overrated	10	14	4	-	-	28	56
Underrated	-	1	5	1	-	7	14
Genuinely rated	6	4	3	2	-	15	30

Table 2. Second cycle student's self-assessments.

Rating	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Total	Percent
Overrated	9	11	2	3	_	25	50
Underrated	-	5	2	1	1	9	18
Genuinely rated	8	6	1	1	-	16	32

Table 3. Third cycle student's self-assessments.

Rating	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Total	Percent
Overrated	11	7	3	2	-	23	46
Underrated	-	4	3	1	-	8	16
Genuinely rated	9	7	2	1	-	19	38

Table 4. Fourth cycle student's self-assessments.

Rating	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Total	Percent
Overrated	10	9	3	-	-	22	44
Underrated	-	4	3	1	-	8	16
Genuinely rated	10	8	1	1	-	20	40

Table 5. Summary.

Rating	First cycle		Second cycle		Third cycle		Fourth cycle	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Overrated	28	56	25	50	23	46	22	44
Underrated	7	14	9	18	8	16	8	16
Genuinely rated	15	30	16	32	19	38	20	40

of the participant students (50%) rated their essays over what they actually deserve. The number of students who rated themselves genuinely was 16. This accounts for 32 percent of the total participants in this study. When this result is compared with the first cycle of self-assessment, the number of students who overrated their essays has reduced by six percent while the students who rated themselves genuinely have increased by only two percent.

The third cycle of self-assessment shows that 46 percent of the students have overrated themselves.

Students who gave themselves lower score were 16 percent in the third phase of self-assessment. Relatively, the number of students who rated genuinely increased by 6 percent compared to those in the second cycle of self-assessment.

In the fourth cycle of self-assessment the number of students who overrated themselves exceeds those who rated their essays genuinely only by two (4 percent). Students who rated themselves correctly increased from 30 percent in the first cycle to 40 percent in the fourth cycle. This shows that improvement has come gradually.

Although there were changes in the consecutive cycles of self-assessment, it was apparent to see from the summary table that 44 percent of students still over rated their essays.

In general, Table 5 summarizes a descriptive statistics for four consecutive sessions of essay writing and self-assessment activities. A look at the collected figures showed that self awarded marks tended to be higher than those given by the three teachers. Self awarded scores differed more from those given by the teachers in the first and second cycles and the difference became less in the third and fourth cycles. Succinctly, the four consecutive writing and self-assessment sessions showed that self-awarded grades were always higher than those given by the three teachers. Comparably, more students have rated their essays genuinely in the fourth cycle of self-assessment. The deviation between those who overrated themselves and those who rated genuinely had greatly narrowed down in the third and fourth cycles of self-assessment. Students experience obtained from the consecutive cycles of self-assessment might have contributed to the improvement at this cycle.

Findings from teachers' interview

Interview was one of the instruments used to collect data. The interview was conducted with EFL teachers. It was used to obtain further information about the perception and practices of EFL learners and teachers towards self-assessment. In addition, the interview was useful as a cross reference and clarification to the responses obtained from document analysis and focused group discussion. Participants in the interview included 10 teachers. The teachers were asked eight questions in order to obtain their views regarding self-assessment.

When teachers were asked about their perception towards self-assessment, all (10) teachers stated that self-assessment develops learner independence and it has to be considered one of the ultimate goals of any form of education and EFL is certainly no exception. Moreover, they said self-assessment is a central way for students to acquire the reflective habits of mind which are essential to their ongoing capacities to do good work and to progressively improve their work over time.

The interviewee teachers were also asked about whether their students perceive self-assessment is helpful or not. Among 10 teachers interviewed, only 2 teachers revealed that students are aware that self-assessment in the classroom is helpful. Furthermore, these teachers stated that self-assessment encourages students to describe their strengths and weaknesses of what they produced. However, majority of teachers (8) expressed that they do not actually know whether the students notice that self assessment is helpful or not.

Moreover, the interviewee respondents were asked about their experience of implementing self-assessment in the classroom. Majority (8) confirmed that they do not have any experience of using self-assessment in the classroom even though they are familiar with the theoretical aspects. On the contrary, some of the interviewees (2) reported that they are currently using self-assessment in their writing classrooms.

Item four was designed to get information from teachers whether their students can evaluate themselves genuinely or not. Among 10 teachers, only 2 teachers stated that students do not evaluate themselves genuinely. According to Orsmond (1996), one of the aims of self-assessment was to compare the extent of student over and under marking of each of the marking criteria with the previously reported work on teachers' assessment. The respondents said that the majority of students evaluated themselves as if they did not make any type of errors and felt that they were always doing a perfect work and got into a disagreement with their teachers. However, the remaining interview respondents (8) expressed that they do not know whether the students evaluated themselves genuinely or not.

When teachers were asked how often they give chance to their students to assess their writing task. Two teachers stated that they conduct two or three self-assessment sessions for a writing course. However, the rest replied they do not have any experience of self-assessment in writing classrooms.

Some of the challenges of implementing self assessment in the classroom were mentioned by the interviewees. Eight interviewees responded that students have poor background of language in general and writing skill in particular. Thus, they explained that students do not have the necessary skill to assess their writings. Only two teachers, however, argued that it is possible to implement self-assessment in writing classrooms by repeatedly engaging students in the activity.

Findings from focused group discussions (FGD)

A focused group discussions of three groups of six students were conducted with randomly selected students. Students were asked to reflect about the kind of perceptions they have towards self-assessment. From the eighteen students participated in three days focused group discussion, the majority (fourteen students) reflected that they have positive attitude to self-assessment. However, four students reflected that they do not feel comfort in assessing themselves. Thus, the focused group discussion result showed that students supported their participation in self-assessment procedures.

A more related question was posed to participant students in the focused group discussion. This was the question which asks students to reflect whether they think self-assessment as a helpful tool to them or not. Here, all the participants but two explained that self-assessment is useful to acquire the desired skill in a meaningful way.

Students responded that self-assessment of their writing assignments helped them to improve their writing skills in the subsequent writing sessions. However, two students reflected ideas opposite to the majority. They claimed that self-assessment wasted their time to do other activities such as home works, and reading assignments for other courses. These two students felt that self-assessment is not helpful and teacher feedback on written assignments is better.

Diversified ideas were raised when participant students were asked to mention some obstacles faced by students in trying to assess their own writing assignments. Students' poor background was mentioned repeatedly as a main cause that affects students' self-assessment. Students stressed that they do not have the necessary skills to assess themselves. Though the checklist was given explicitly, many students still fail to understand what each criterion means. Teachers' failure to give chances of this sort and to give appropriate motivation were also mentioned as main factors behind students' inefficiency on self-assessment. Students responded that they were rarely given opportunities to assess their own performances. Even those rare opportunities of self-assessment were with vague criteria and with the absence of explicit guideline. The other factor mentioned as an obstacle to self-assessment is motivation. Students claimed that they lack the motivation to read each guideline instead simply tend to overrate their papers rather than critically reading each criterion and giving genuine self-assessment.

Moreover, participant students were asked the amount of time they spend for planning, drafting, revising and editing of their paper. From the three days discussions, nine students respond that they submit their papers without paying attention to these phases of writing. Four of the participants, however, revealed that they usually take time to draft, revise and edit their papers before they submit their written works to their teachers. In addition, five of the participants explained that they rarely follow such writing phases. According to them, following such procedures will be tiresome and will make them run out of time.

Participants were asked to respond to the question "how often do your teachers make you assess your writing in EFL classrooms?" Although interviewed teachers attribute their failure to give learners chances of self-assessment to their students' poor writing skill, students explained that they did not get opportunities of this sort. Twelve focused group discussion participants claimed that they have not been given any kind of chance to assess their writing assignments by EFL writing teachers. On the other hand, six students explained that they have got the opportunity and appreciation from EFL teachers to assess themselves. These students also revealed that teachers do not usually give proper guidelines and trainings so that students can assess themselves easily. Therefore, the discussion concerning

this question seemed to show that EFL teachers were not using self-assessment activities in writing classrooms.

The results of focused group discussion showed that most students (16) supported their participation in self-assessment. Students explained that they felt comfortable in assessing their own written performances. Students also claimed that lack of experience and misconceptions about self-assessment were main reasons for many students to overrate their works. Group discussion participants reported that they have learned that self-assessment activities helped them to build their confidence and develop their writing skills. However, only two of the group discussion participants replied that self-assessment practices wasted their time and should be replaced by teachers' correction and feedback. The two students explained that they feel as if they are doing teachers' job.

Conclusion

As it was mentioned in the introduction part of this paper, this study was conducted in an attempt to have a look at the perceptions and practices of EFL learners and teachers towards writing self-assessment. The research was carried out in EFL writing classrooms of Bahir Dar University.

To conduct the study, the following four research questions were framed:

1. How do EFL learners perceive writing self-assessment?
2. What kinds of perceptions do EFL writing teachers have towards self assessment?
3. Do students assess themselves genuinely and rate their level of writing effectively?
4. What does the experience of EFL writing teachers towards self assessment look like?

In order to answer these questions, the researchers took 50 second year English major students who were selected from the total of 240 students using simple random sampling method and 10 English instructors at Bahir Dar University selected by using comprehensive sampling method.

Interview, focused group discussion, checklist (i.e document analysis) were used as instrument. The data gathered from teachers' interview and focused group discussion were analyzed qualitatively. The results of document analysis were analyzed using raw figures and percentage.

Generally, the findings of this study revealed that:

1. Both teachers and students have positive attitude towards self-assessment.
2. Teachers feel students do not evaluate themselves genuinely, and the majority of students evaluate themselves as if they do not make any type of errors.

3. Majority of teachers do not have any experience of using self-assessment in the classroom even though they are familiar with the theoretical aspect

4. Majority of students tended to over rate their written performance compared to what they actually deserve.

5. Many students showed improvement as they had more practices

6. Experience, practice, sufficient training, and clear guidelines are necessary for self-assessment to be effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers training institutions should prepare workshops and seminars for teachers towards self- assessment. Teachers should also update themselves on how to implement self-assessment in EFL writing classrooms by participating in various seminars, workshops and continuous professional development training.

The researchers would like to recommend further studies be conducted so that the results can be shared to inspire teachers and students towards self-assessment practice. Teachers education programs should provide and train teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in the learners.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

Blanche P (1988). Self-assessment of foreign language skills: Implications for teachers and researchers. In RELC J. 19(1):75-93.

Blue G (1994). Self assessment of foreign Language skills, does it work? CLE Working Papers, 3:18-35

Chen Y (2005). Peer and self-assessment in EFL classrooms. Selected Papers of the Fourteenth International Symposium on English Teaching. Taipei:Crane Publishing Co., Ltd. pp. 320-329.

Dickinson L (1987). Self instruction in language learning. Cambridge:CUP

Finch A (2002). Authentic assessment: Implications for EFL performance testing in Korea. Secondary Education Research, 49:89-122.

Orsmond P, Merry S, Reiling K (1996). The importance of marking criteria in the use of peer assessment. Assess. Eval. Higher Educ. 21(3):239-251.

Oscarsson M (1998). "Learner Self-Assessment of Language Skills". IATEFL TEA SIG Newsletter, Nov. 1998.

Williams E (1992). Student attitudes towards approaches to learning and assessment, Assessment and evaluation in higher education, 17(1):45-58.

APPENDIX 1. Checklist for self-assessment.

Ability	Student	Teacher
I. Mechanics		
My paragraphs have		
i. No spelling error		
ii. No punctuation error		
iii. No capitalization		
II. Sentence Level		
I Can write paragraphs /sentences with		
i. no fragment		
ii. no fused		
iii. no comma splice		
iv. no faulty parallelism		
v. no confusing pronoun reference		
vi. no dangling modifier		
vii. no misplaced modifiers		
III. Paragraph Level		
My paragraph is		
i. with clear thesis statement		
ii. unified		
iii. coherent		
v. complete		
v. and has variety		

APPENDIX 2. Interview questions.

Have you ever implemented writing self-assessment in your classroom?

What do you think of writing self-assessment?

Do you think students perceive writing self-assessment as helpful to them?

Do you think that students evaluate themselves genuinely?

If your answer to question number 4 is "yes", how often do you give a chance to your students to assess their writing task by themselves?

Are there challenges that do not allow you to implement self-assessment in writing classrooms?

If your answer to question number six is "yes", what challenges do you face?

What do you recommend to have a better level of self-assessment implementation in writing classrooms?

APPENDIX 3. Focused Group Discussion Questions.

What kind of perception do you have towards writing self-assessment?

Do you think that self-assessment is helpful to you? How?

Most of the students have overrated themselves in the three days self-assessment sessions. What do you think are the reasons?

What problems do you usually face while trying to assess your paragraphs or essays?

How much time do you usually spend for planning, drafting, revising and editing your paper?

How often do your teachers make you assess yourself in EFL classrooms?

What have you learned about self-assessment from your writing class experiences?

Journal of
Languages and Culture

Related Journals Published by Academic Journals

- Journal of Media and Communication Studies
- International Journal of English and Literature
- Philosophical Papers and Reviews
- Educational Research and Reviews
- Journal of African Studies and Development
- Philosophical Papers and Reviews