

# **The Use of Self-assessment in Second Language Assessment**

**Yoko Saito**

## **Overview**

The current trends in learner-centered language teaching approaches, and a growing interest in “authenticity and interactiveness” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) have led to a greater interest in expanding the use of second language self-assessment (Bachman, 2000; Calfee & Hiebert, 1991; Hamayan, 1995). Many language testers have been inspired to investigate whether students are able to make a meaningful contribution to their own evaluation. It would be ideal if the findings of all the empirical studies on the effectiveness of self-assessment were consistent; however, they have produced varying results which have made test administrators and teachers skeptical about implementing self-assessment in the assessment of second language ability.

## **Self-assessment**

One of the primary reasons for the contradictory empirical results may be explained by a lack of a consistent definition of self-assessment. The concept goes by a variety of names such as self-evaluation, self-rating, self-testing, and self-appraisal. Because self-assessment is a loosely defined term, a comparison of empirical results is problematic.

Another problem may be that the definition depends on the purpose of self-assessment. Self-assessment can be used for a variety of purposes, including appropriate placement, diagnosis and feedback to the learner, program evaluation, assessment of attitudes and socio-psychological differences, determination of course grade, and so forth (Henning, 1987). Because of the inherent intricacy in providing a comprehensive definition of self-assessment, a number of researchers (Bachman, 2000; Haughton & Dickinson, 1988; Oscarson, 1989) have attempted to define the term by identifying two types of self-assessment according to their purpose: (1) performance-oriented self-assessment, and (2) development-oriented self-assessment. A major distinction between performance-oriented self-assessment and development-oriented self-assessment is that the former typically samples the test takers’ performance at one particular point in time, whereas the latter assesses the participants for an extended period in order to detect changes and patterns of development over time. The following will discuss the two types of self-assessment and their implementation guidelines.

## **Performance-oriented Self-assessment**

Performance-oriented assessment measures the outcomes related to selection, certification, placement, achievement, diagnosis, etc. For instance, if self-assessment is used as a placement exam in a university ESL program, it will be administered to the students only once prior to program entrance. In this case, students are asked to evaluate their language ability on whatever is being assessed.

Many researchers have investigated whether self-assessment instruments accurately sample the learners’ language ability at one particular point in time. Although there remains

serious concerns about learners' objectivity and capacity to view their achievements, the use of self-assessment for the purpose of the performance-oriented self-assessment has various advantages. First, it eliminates concerns with cheating and security issues (LeBlanc & Painchaud, 1985). Second, it is cost and time efficient (Strong-Klause, 2000). These advantages are often attractive enough to induce test administrators to implement self-assessment into their language programs. However, these test administrators need to be aware that self-reporting is affected by many factors including the wording of the questions, the assessed language skills, the proficiency level of the students, the cultural backgrounds of the students, and so forth (Strong-Klause, 2000). Most importantly, self-assessment is severely influenced when there is a perceived advantage to a higher rating. Many test administrators are hesitant to use it in situations where the consequences of the self-assessment seriously affect the test takers' present circumstances. Because the students' self-ratings are greatly affected by subjective errors, the results must be interpreted with caution when used for the purpose of placement, certification, diagnosis, and admission.

### **Development-oriented Self-assessment**

Development-oriented assessment measures the process of learning (usually in a classroom environment) in which self-managed activities are incorporated. It is used as an observation of "the participants for an extended period in order to detect changes and patterns of development over time" (Dornyei, 2001, p. 194). This type of assessment began to receive attention as the result of an increasing interest in the learner-centered approach.

In a learner-centered curriculum, learners are encouraged to not only be test takers, but also to be active participants in the assessment process (Bachman, 2000; Dickinson, 1987). By incorporating self-assessment into classroom learning, students as well as teachers acknowledge assessment as a mutual responsibility, and not as the sole responsibility of the teacher (Oscarson, 1989).

Furthermore, a number of empirical studies indicate the presence of increased productivity and autonomy, higher motivation, less frustration, and higher retention rates among learners when development-oriented self-assessment is utilized (Dickinson, 1987; Ellis, 1994; Gardner & McIntyre, 1991; McNamara & Deane, 1995; O'Malley & Pierce, 1996; Oscarson, 1989; Peirce, Swain, & Hart, 1993; Rivers, 2001). Though the findings of these studies make the implementation of self-assessment sound plausible, issues regarding the validity and reliability of the assessment need to be addressed. For example, when self-assessment is implemented in a portfolio project, the students engage in multiple assessments, a cycle of self-assessment and feedback, throughout the semester. Because the final product is influenced by feedback from a teacher, a peer, or even a parent, the completed portfolio might not be an accurate measure of the students' language ability. In other words, if the purpose is to measure the students' language ability, the validity of the portfolio is severely affected by a confounding variable such as feedback. Furthermore, the complexity involved in grading a portfolio exacerbates the reliability of the assessment.

Although the issues of reliability and validity remain the primary concern for development-oriented self-assessment, many studies have focused on how the implementation of

self-assessment in classroom enhances the students' language learning. This approach not only promotes autonomy in student learning, it also helps the teachers measure the students' progress in the course. Development-oriented self-assessment may best serve as a complementary instrument to traditional assessment presently; however, it may become a more viable part of the assessment process when more research has been conducted to investigate its validity and reliability.

## Conclusion

Because self-assessment is performed through complex cognitive processes which are affected by many uncontrollable factors, there still remains much disagreement in the discussion regarding the effective use of self-assessment. Despite a number of difficulties in appropriately implementing self-assessment, the ways in which we resolve these issues will certainly provide valuable insights into the nature of language teaching, learning, and assessment. When these challenges are met, it is hoped that language institutions and classroom teachers will consider the potential of self-assessment as both a valid and reliable supplement to traditional assessment.

## REFERENCES

- Bachman, L. F. (2000). Learner-directed assessment in ESL. In G. Ekbatani & H. Pierson (Eds.), *Learner-directed assessment in ESL* (pp. ix-xii). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Calfee, R. C., & Hiebert, E. (1991). Classroom assessment of reading. In R. Barr, L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research, Volume 2* (pp. 281-309). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and researching motivation*. London: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. (1991). Motivational variables in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 13*, 57-72.
- Hamayan, E. (1995). Approaches to alternative assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 15*, 212-226.
- Haughton, G., & Dickinson, L. (1988). Collaborative assessment by masters' candidates in a tutor based system. *Language Testing, 5*, 233-246.
- Henning, G. (1987). *A guide to language testing: Development, evaluation, research*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- LeBlanc, R., & Painchaud, G. (1985). Self-assessment as a second language placement instrument. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*, 673-687.
- McNamara, M., & Deane, D. (1995). Self-assessment activities toward autonomy in language learning. *TESOL Journal, 5*, 18-23.
- O'Malley, J. M., & Pierce, L. V. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners*. Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Oscarson, M. (1989). Self-assessment of language proficiency: Rationale and applications.

- Language Testing*, 6, 1-13.
- Peirce, B. M., Swain, M., & Hart, D. (1993). Self-assessment, French immersion, and locus of control. *Applied Linguistics*, 14, 25-42.
- Rivers, W. P. (2001) Autonomy at all costs: An ethnography of metacognitive self-assessment and self-management among experienced language learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85, 279-290.
- Strong-Klause, D. (2000). Exploring the effectiveness of self-assessment strategies in ESL placement. In G. Ekbatani & H. Pierson (Eds.), *Learner-directed assessment in ESL* (pp. 49-73). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.