

CHAPTER 6

THE BENEFITS AND THE CHALLENGES OF SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A TOOL THAT PROMOTES LEARNING

Lana Chernik

Context

Drammen Upper-Secondary School places great value on research in the field of education, professional cooperation within departments, and participation in educational programmes such as Erasmus+. These activities help us better understand our roles as educators and develop new skills, methodologies, and pedagogical approaches relevant to the 21st-century school. In light of these objectives, the research I have conducted will hopefully play a role in bridging the gap between pedagogical theory and its application in practice, to enhance student learning outcomes and guide teachers in designing their lessons.

Background

My research was conducted among upper-secondary school students in their 1st year. 28 students were enrolled in a class on a general studies programme, which in the Norwegian context means they will be going on to university, as opposed to students enrolled in vocational studies who will choose a vocation right after upper-secondary school.

As an English teacher, I decided to conduct my research in a class where I teach English to the first-year students (level B1-B2). These students have 5 hours of English each week, and the curriculum encompasses a wide range of competencies aimed at developing proficiency in language learning, communication, and critical thinking within the context of English language and literature. The research design itself was applicable to any group of students.

Combining Teaching and Research: Why self-assessment?

Any activity we try to master, any new skill we want to perfect, needs practice and time. However, without an accurate assessment of current achievement, it may not always be clear how much progress has been made or what still needs improvement. When it comes to learning English at school, it is largely the teacher's task to assess learners' progress, identify their level of achievement, and point out areas for improvement. At the same time, learners are expected to engage in self-assessment as an effective way to gauge their progress and set new goals. This expectation is documented in the Competence aims list for first-year students taking the English course. The two competence aims central to my research state that learners are supposed to "use appropriate strategies for language learning, text creation and communication" and "assess and revise one's own texts based on criteria in the subject and knowledge of language". These competence aims indicate the need for English language learners to be aware of various learning strategies and to critically assess their own work. Additionally, most English course books and course books in other subjects published in Norway contain self-assessment sections with a set of questions or criteria that help students identify which learning goals have been achieved so far and to what extent, or to what degree, a particular skill has been developed. Similarly, most teachers assume self-assessment is a valuable tool that students can use easily in the classroom with some degree of regularity. Although educators generally agree on the practical value of self-assessment for students, is there enough evidence that students find it meaningful, rewarding, and worth the time spent? Does the fact that the curriculum expects students to engage in self-evaluation and that the course book contains a self-assessment section suggest that students assess their progress regularly and with clear benefits? And if they do, what gaps exist in students' ability to assess themselves as novices, compared with teacher assessment? Do they see any benefits, and what are the possible challenges of self-assessment? With these questions in mind, I set out to investigate students' perspective on self-assessment as a tool that can potentially promote their learning. Additionally, my goal was to investigate whether gaps exist in students' self-assessment compared with teacher assessment.

At the start, I reintroduced my students to the concept of self-assessment and made them aware of how learning outcomes can be measured. I conducted a survey with the students in my English class. The survey revealed that students

were generally familiar with self-assessment as a practice: most participants (17 out of 28) reported doing self-assessment from time to time, 8 reported doing it in every lesson, and 3 reported never engaging in self-assessment activities. However, when asked whether they think regular self-assessment could be of benefit to their learning, the majority (15 out of 28) were uncertain, 9 students were positive, while 4 students were sceptical. These findings led me to the following assumption: if students are trained to assess their own work, it may become easier for them to recognise the value of self-assessment and to link regular self-assessment activities with positive learning outcomes.

This project was conducted concurrently with the Literary Project, which involved discussing, analysing, and interpreting several short stories by English-language writers studied in class. For 7 weeks, as students engaged in activities that typically facilitate understanding and interpretation of literary texts, they were consistently encouraged to measure their progress against a predefined set of criteria. Students' work on the Literary Project resulted in so-called Literary Conversations, and at this point, students were expected to assess their final product independently. They were asked to submit a video recording of their conversation, and afterwards to assess their contribution to the talk in terms of content, language, and speaking skills. Additionally, every student was to award themselves a grade.

As a next step, students' self-assessment results were compared with the teacher's assessment to identify similarities and discrepancies that revealed the gap between the two perspectives. In 47% of cases, the grade students had given themselves differed from the one awarded by the teacher. At this point, as a final part of the research, the students were asked to reflect on the advantages of self-assessment they observed during the 7-week period and the challenges they encountered in assessing their final product (i.e. a literary conversation with another student).

Findings and Reflections

According to data collected after the project was completed, more than two-thirds of students reported that regular self-assessment increased their awareness of their strengths, while 85% agreed that it helped them identify areas for improvement. Overall, most students agreed that self-assessment has a positive impact when used regularly. This stood in clear contrast to the initial response

about the practical value of self-assessment, when only 20% of respondents agreed that self-assessment promotes learning.

These findings, together with students' reflections on self-assessment, supported several initial assumptions about the role of self-assessment in promoting learning and presented students' perspectives on the issue. First, the collected data supported the original assumption about the practical value of regular and consistent self-evaluation. As students reported in the survey and later confirmed in the interviews, evaluating one's own work increases awareness of strengths and weaknesses, helping learners identify areas for improvement and set learning goals. The ultimate value of self-evaluation therefore, lies in enabling students to reflect on their learning experiences and possibly modify and adapt their learning methods and strategies. Second, it is vital that students are well trained in assessing their own work. Applying the suggested criteria to gauge one's success and track progress can be challenging if students have not practised distinguishing between levels of proficiency. In our case, when assessing language and communication, students were expected to place themselves in the "Yes", "Partially" or "No" category based on several criteria. If students are to make judgements about whether they "demonstrate dynamic and spontaneous conversational ability", "speak freely and with a high degree of fluency", "employ advanced, varied and nuanced vocabulary", etc., they need to be shown what characterises high, medium and low achievement in each of the above-mentioned categories. My project, therefore, made it clear to me that students can effectively assess their learning achievement only when properly trained to use self-assessment techniques. Finally, I learned that students will only be motivated to engage further in assessing their own work if self-assessment is limited to a small number of categories. Having too many aspects to evaluate at once might leave students confused, overwhelmed and discouraged, which will inevitably result in a loss of motivation and make the whole idea of self-assessment counterproductive.

One important takeaway from my project that made me reconsider my own practice is that, as educators, we cannot be complacent about including a self-assessment section at the end of a course book chapter. We cannot simply send our students to "go and do self-assessment" if we really want this process to be meaningful and motivational for them. Self-assessment techniques should be taught, and it is important that learners are guided through their use, particularly in classes with a high level of language proficiency. There is allegedly a considerable difference between evaluating one's skills and competencies as a

beginner and doing self-assessment as a proficient learner. Assessing one's ability to conjugate verbs in the Present Simple is easy, whereas evaluating how advanced, varied, and nuanced one's vocabulary is in a particular talk or paper demands from a learner a whole set of language skills and competencies.

My initial assumption about the value of self-assessment was also confirmed. The students reported that self-assessment “made them reflect on their strengths and weaknesses”, “made them more aware of the mistakes they make”, “helped them gain insight into HOW they learn”, “enabled them to become more independent learners who do not always have to rely on the teacher's feedback”, and “made them more critical of the learning methods and techniques they use”. Although it is hard to overestimate the overall value of self-assessment, a particular benefit linked to evaluating one's own work stands out. When used regularly and consistently, self-assessment encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning and, to a lesser extent, to rely less on the teacher's feedback. In this way, learners develop critical thinking, learn to set individual goals, and build self-confidence, all of which are valuable and essential skills across various aspects of life.

As important as it is to recognise the benefits of self-assessment, it is imperative to consider the challenges learners might encounter when evaluating their own work, and the gaps between learners' self-assessment and the teacher's evaluation. One of the most frequent challenges reported by students was a lack of objectivity and anxiety that the teacher's assessment would differ greatly from the learners'. Some students were unsure whether the teacher's idea of a rich and advanced vocabulary, for instance, would coincide with their own view. This brings us back to the complexity of assessment criteria: the higher your level of English, the more complex the criteria you need to apply to measure progress, and, consequently, the more advanced skills and understanding are required to assess your own work effectively. One way to bridge this gap is to create conditions for regular, consistent self-assessment practice, developing the skills necessary to become a confident and objective self-tutor. When learners can define what “advanced vocabulary” is or what it means to “support viewpoints with evidence from the literary text”, their goal in self-assessment becomes clear and attainable. It is therefore the teacher's task to ensure learners fully understand the standards by which their performance is being judged and the expectations the teacher has for a particular assignment.

Another gap between students' self-assessment as novices and the teacher's assessment concerns emotional involvement, such as "being too hard on yourself" and "giving yourself a lower grade than you actually deserve". This challenge might turn self-assessment into a discouraging practice for learners who lack self-esteem and tend to underrate their performance. Once again, the teacher's role is to allow sufficient time to develop the necessary skills and to make self-assessment an indispensable habit. Additionally, self-assessment might be combined with peer assessment, which will provide multiple perspectives and will be particularly beneficial for learners who struggle with self-confidence, and will gradually make independent evaluations a motivating and meaningful activity.

Some students also described self-assessment as time-consuming, particularly when practised frequently ("If we start doing self-assessment in every single lesson, it will be too much and I'll definitely lose motivation."). It is not surprising that students might perceive all the activities related to self-assessment as a burden and an additional workload, since evaluating one's product and assessing one's achievements and shortcomings take time and effort. However, when students realise the practical value of the process and are genuinely interested in self-improvement, the task will not seem so daunting. Furthermore, if the teacher allocates time for thorough reflection and self-evaluation in class and subsequently makes it an integral part of any in-class activity rather than presenting it as an extra task, this challenge will be easily overcome.

All in all, I was able to confirm my assumption that self-assessment is a highly valuable tool that may help learners improve their academic performance and develop skills that facilitate personal development. However, it has also revealed several challenges from the student's perspective, which must be addressed if self-assessment is to become an integral and meaningful part of the learning process. Based on my findings, it is vital that students are taught and trained to engage in self-assessment. Clear guidance and consistent, regular practice can turn self-assessment into a motivating process that positively affects students' engagement in learning. When students are presented with detailed rubrics that clearly outline assessment criteria, they will be more confident in applying them when measuring their own learning outcomes. It is particularly important that students understand the standards and assessment criteria; therefore, discussing what it takes to meet them, as well as providing examples of both high-quality work and work with certain shortcomings, will be helpful if students are to develop the skills to become independent learners. To avoid self-assessment

turning into a time-consuming and off-putting practice, it should be incorporated into regular classroom activities. The importance of training and practice cannot be overstated, and a routine for regular self-assessment should be developed. Finally, training students to objectively assess their work, removing the emotional component, and regarding self-assessment as a learning tool rather than a judgment will positively contribute to its use as a practice that promotes learning.

In this final part of my reflection, I would like to comment on my personal engagement in this project and how it has contributed to my professional development as a teacher. One of my goals was to gather evidence-based data to support my assumption that self-assessment is a valuable tool for my students, helping them become self-regulating, independent learners who rely more on their own evaluation than on the teacher's assessment of their work. There is little doubt that the highest learning outcomes can only be achieved when the learner is genuinely interested in acquiring new knowledge and is motivated by something bigger than a grade on their diploma. Simultaneously, I was eager to remove the uncertainty and frustration that students sometimes feel when receiving a grade on an assignment. When students are given clear assessment criteria and are trained to apply them, they can set individual goals, adjust their learning methods, and ultimately take charge of their own learning. My students were highly cooperative, excited, and eager to make self-assessment a regular part of the educational process, and it was rewarding to receive positive feedback indicating increased engagement and interest.

Overall, these kinds of projects contribute to the teacher's professional development through frequent reflection on one's teaching practices, exploration of alternative and allegedly more effective teaching techniques, and analysis of collected data. My project allowed me to explore various aspects of self-assessment as a tool to enhance the learning process, including the use of self-assessment techniques and teaching practices. Simultaneously, this reflective process helped me develop analytical skills: I had to analyse and interpret data collected through surveys and interviews with my students and draw conclusions and recommendations on how to bridge the gaps between novice student assessment and expert teacher assessment. Based on the insights I gained, it seems necessary to further explore how various tools, including digital tools and platforms, e-portfolios, and interactive self-assessment apps, can facilitate self-assessment and help learners measure their progress and reflect on their learning outcomes.