Using Self-assessment Checklists to Make English Language Learners Self-directed

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Abstract:

Self-directed learning (SDL) has recently gathered momentum among EFL/ESL researchers. Within the SDL framework, learners are responsible to monitor and evaluate their own learning. Student self-assessment can play a crucial role in helping learners become more dedicated and motivated. This study aimed at examining the role of filling out self-assessment checklists by 115 Iranian EFL learners over three successive semesters with reference to the role of gender and level of proficiency. Three classes filled out a standard weekly self-evaluation checklist while three corresponding classes passed the same courses simultaneously without filling out any checklist. The result showed that there is not a significant difference between the final score of the control group and the treatment group as a whole. However, individual analysis of mean score of parallel classes showed that there is a significant difference between the mean score of learners in third semester as the group filling out the checklist scored significantly higher than those who did not. Individual analysis of mean score of third groups also showed a significant difference between the mean score of females and males as female learners earned higher scores; however, overall score of learners did not show any significant difference considering gender factor. In conclusion the implications of the present study are discussed.

Keywords: *EFL Assessment, Self-assessment Checklist, Self-directed Learning, Self-regulated Learning*

1. Introduction

1.1. Assessment and Evaluation: Do They Overlap?

Most recently many educational researchers have landed into a hot debate over the distinctions between assessment and evaluation. This is not the purpose of this paper to revolve around this issue. Nor is it intended here to explain why either of them are essential parts of any educational setting. Rather, this study aims to underscore the significance of including self-evaluation and self-assessment programs into a syllabus in order to make English as a Foreign Language (EFL henceforth) learners more dedicated and self-directed. However, it is decent to define the aforementioned terms in brevity so that we be able to expand on the reasons behind the importance of self-evaluation and self-assessment in EFL classes. In lay terms, evaluation gives us a general picture about the quality and worth of something. More technically, evaluation in education is defined as a gauge of the effectiveness and usefulness of an educational curriculum or program which is normally in a form of a report resulted from judgments on the part of one or more evaluators (Cassidy, 2006; Rogers & Smith, 2006; Secolsky, 2011). Assessment, put simply, is an attempt to find the faults within an educational system in order that assessors are able to remove the faults. In technical terms, assessment is the continuous process of documenting and/or measuring knowledge and skills of a person or group of people to enhance the quality of their future performance (in this context, language learning). In assessment, there is no necessity to get to the current quality of the performance; only improvement on next performances is what matters. No descriptive words are used to mark the level of quality, such as 'good', 'excellent,' 'satisfactory,' or 'poor'. On contrary, in an evaluation report, only information about the current actual quality of the performance is provided (Rotenberg, 2005). This can be in the form of a grade or a score or just an evaluative comment, such as 'satisfactory' (Baehr, 2005, Secolsky

2011). As Baehr (2005) plainly puts it, "In assessment, the locus of control rests with the performer while in evaluation, it rests with the observer" (p. 441). It goes without saying that both assessment and evaluation are imperative parts to be included in any educational program. Yet, both assessment and evaluation serve their own specific purposes and neglecting one at the expense of the other may lead to irreparable setbacks. The point that both assessment and evaluation share many similarities should be also taken into consideration: "both involve specifying criteria to observe in a performance or outcome; both require the collection of data and other evidence by observing the performance or by looking at the outcome or product and both require a performer and a person who collects information about the performance" (Baehr, 2005, p. 441).

1.2. Learner Self-assessment

According to Boud (1986) self-assessment is "the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgments about the extent to which they met these criteria and standards" (as cited in McDonald, 2004).Self-assessment was preferred to be the main focus of this study instead of self-evaluation because of the different nature of these two processes: self-assessment is diagnostic, more objective, more process-oriented, ongoing and formative while self-evaluation is judgmental, more subjective, more product-oriented, one-shot and summative (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Bordon & Owens, 2001; Brown, Race, & Smith, 1996; Palomba & Banta, 1999, Suskie, 2004). As the above explanations suggest, self-assessment can be of more use to make learners aware of their own learning pitfalls and help them find the ways to ameliorate their learning experience. Having knowledge of their own skills and competences and monitoring them constantly, affects learners` emotional experiences in particular situations, their behavior in comparable situations in the short-term, and their emotional well-being in the long term (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Stipek, Recchia, McClintic & Lewis, 1992). In other words, they become more aware of the gaps in their knowledge and understanding providing them with feedback on areas to develop, and an opportunity to reflect on the skills and experience they have just gained (Kear, 2011). Self-assessment is a part of meta-cognitive knowledge which refers to "higher order thinking which involves active control over the cognitive processes engaged in learning" (Livingston, 1996). Metacognitive skills results in awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner by enriching self-assessment skills and being able to monitor and evaluate one`s own progress.

The indications are, therefore, that student self-assessment can have the following benefits (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Black & William, 1998; Dan, 2002; Earl, 2003; Kear, 2011; Sitzman, Brown & Bauer, 2010):
- Provides opportune and fruitful feedback and allows for fast and effective assessment of student learning
- Enhances academic integrity through student self-reporting of learning progress
- Promotes the skills of reflective learning and self-monitoring
- Increases learner intrinsic motivation
- Increases learner self-esteem

While learners take the responsibility of their own learning they are also accountable for their own assessment. Ergo, teaching students how to self-assess is a part of guiding them learn how to learn, i.e. Self-Directed Learning.

1.3. Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

The prevalence of the concept of self-directed learning has been in line with the new types of modern lifestyle and has been considered as a tool for changing society through the clarification of the new personal accountabilities (Ambikairajah, Epps, Sheng & Celler, 2008; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy 1991; Chu & Tsai, 2009; Confessore, 1992; Jarvis, 2001; Loyens, Magda & Rikers, 2008). Self-directed learning has been offered as a survival necessity in response to the fast-changing requirements

of modern era (Caffarella, 1993; Grow, 1991; Quinney, Smith & Galbraith, 2010). Self-directed learning is used synonymously with 'autonomous learning' or 'self-regulated learning' elsewhere in the literature (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Iran-Nejad & Chissom, 1992; Pajares, 2008; Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman, 1990). Although, there have been mention of subtle differences of these terms by some researchers, the basic premise underpinning them has been identical (Loyens, Magda & Rikers, 2008; Saks & Leijen, 2014). Self-directed learning is commonly referred to as "a process in which individuals take the initiative with or without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, selecting appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). The basic premise of SDL is its focus on the individual learner. Each person chooses to learn about various topics in a way and fashion that best suits them (Roberson, 2012). SDL has been mostly studied with reference to two overriding learning theories, namely, Constructivist Theory and Self-determination Theory. According to the constructivist theory of learning, learners build their own understanding of a subject through engaged activities, direct involvement, experiencing things and reflecting on their experiences, rather than passively receiving the material offered to them (Douglass & Morris, 2014). Teachers can enhance learners' construction of knowledge through posing challenging questions, giving pupils enough time to self-reflect, taking care of learners' needs, and establishing environments that allow students to make choices that are synonymous with the overall objectives of the courses (Duckworth, 2006; Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark,2006; Reeve, 2009). Conversely, when the instructor is the only person in charge of assessment and monitoring, students lose control and autonomy over their learning which may reduce their intrinsic motivation (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Flint & Johnson, 2011). Self-determination theory states that motivation ranges from extrinsic motivation (e.g. grades or applause) to intrinsic (e.g. self-satisfaction) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students become intrinsically motivated when learning tasks give them a sense of autonomy, competence, relatedness, or purpose (Douglass & Morris, 2014; Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007). Even though extrinsic motivations (e.g. grades and comfortable environment), is a vital asset to quality learning, it may be more important to determine ways to enable students to direct, monitor and assess their own learning processes (Flint & Johnson, 2011; Herman, 2012; Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick, 2005). By empowering learners to reflect on their own learning processes, assess their own knowledge on a subject, and identify areas that require further attention and work, teachers can help their students to a great extent (Brown, 2005; Douglass & Morris, 2014; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Winne & Hadwin, 1998). Clearly, when students are intrinsically motivated to succeed, they will perform better in high cognitive tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Pink, 2011). SDL eliminates instructor hegemony as the main authority by allowing every single student to have a chance to control his or her own learning. As Candy (1991) states concisely, "self-directed learning is at once a social and psychological construct, a philosophical ideal, and a literal impossibility the beginning of lifelong learning; keystone of the learning society; a supplement to and substitute for formal education system; a vehicle for the mastering of established knowledge and for the transformation of personal understanding" (p. 424). The most important potential of SDL is its applicability to variety of subjects, situations and learners (Grow, 1991; Roberson, 2012). Student-directed assessment can be utilized as a learning tool that can positively impact self-reflection and analysis (Dochy, 1992; Douglass & Morris, 2014; Glaser, 1990, Roberson, 2012). If students be able to assess their own learning, they come to know that their learning is associated with a very positive kind of challenge, which increases motivation rather than decreasing it. Moreover, they experience an improvement in their learning because they get a firm grasp of *how* they learn rather than just *what* they learn (Dan, 2002; Earl, 2003; Glasson, 2009). There have been plethora of research with regard to the influences of using self-assessment as a fruitful tool for optimizing learning; however, there is rarity of studies about use of self-assessment in EFL contexts. This study, thus, aims to fill this gap in the literature. It must be pointed out that many studies have shown the peculiarities of language learning process which makes it distinctive from learning of other subjects (See Borg, 2006 for thorough discussion).

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

One hundred and fifteen Iranian intermediate EFL students participated in this study. Participants filled out consent forms prior to participating in the study. Fifty-four were male and 61 were female. Three classes were assigned as the treatment group and three classes as the control group. The study coincided the same routine schedule of an English language institute curriculum in Kerman, Iran. That being said, no modification was imposed on the regular course of instruction prescribed by the institute syllabus. All the students were of the same level based on the standard proficiency and placement tests of the English language institute. All the classes were co-educational consisting of approximately the same number of males and females. In the first semester they were in intermediate level. In the second semester during the study they progressed towards upper-intermediate level. Finally, in the third semester they just stepped into the advanced level of proficiency. The participants were all adults whose age ranged 18 to 29.

2.2. Instrument

A standard performance self-assessment checklist was developed to be administered to EFL learners (see the appendix). Using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22, the internal consistency for the reliability of the checklist was calculated and Cronbach alpha of 0.83 was obtained. According to Kline (2000), Cronbach alpha of more than 0.7 is good (while Cronbach alpha of more than 0.6 is acceptable). The performance self-assessment checklist had five major subsections: preparedness, homework, classroom activities, behavior and attitude. The questions were Likert-type scale consisting of options poor, fair, good and excellent. The scoring guidelines were as follows: Excellent (4), Good (3), Fair (2) and Poor (0)

Here is an example of the task students were required to do:
Example 1: How do you see your preparedness for the class during the week?
  ➤ Excellent: I was prepared every day <u>and</u> I was on time every day.
  ➤ Good: I was unprepared just one day <u>and/or</u> I was late only one day.
  ➤ Fair: I was unprepared two or more days <u>and/or</u> I was late on two or three days
  ➤ Poor: I was unprepared every day <u>and/or</u> I was late on more than three days

The research questions for this study are as follows:
  1. Is there a significance relationship between filling out formative self-assessment checklists and summative final assessment?
  2. Does proficiency level of EFL students have any influence on the benefit they gain from continuous self-assessment?
  3. Do male and female EFL learners differ on the amount of aid they get from the formative self-assessment?

2.3. Procedure

Three classes out of six classes participating in this study were required to fill out the performance self-assessment checklist and give it to the teacher on a biweekly schedule over three successive semesters. Students had to attend classes three times a week. By this account, these learners had to submit their self-assessment checklists to the teacher after the end of six sessions in every two weeks. These three classes, which are called treatment group henceforward, consisted of EFL learners who shared the same EFL educational background and were all adults (age group 18 to 29). Three other classes (control group hence forward) were not required to fill out any questionnaire as the regular course of instruction and final assessment was followed by the teacher. Thereupon, each semester, there were two paralleled classes advancing towards the next level. According to the data obtained from the survey prior to the beginning of study, learners were comparable on the matters of first language and level of proficiency. The ratio of male to female students in all classes (both treatment and control group) was about 50-50 percent. The same teacher instructed all the six classes: one on the even days

of the week, the other on the odd days of the week. Parallel classes were held in the same period of time during the day. Sustained effort was made by the researcher to contain the effect of any potential extraneous variable. Independent (unpaired) sample t-test was used to calculate mean differences between the final examination score of learners on two levels: firs, the mean score difference gained from the final exams of each two parallel classes was calculated; second, the overall mean score difference of both control group and treatment group over the three semesters were calculated:

n (1, 2, 3) = Classes who did not fill out the checklist
w (1, 2, 3) = Classes who filled out the checklist

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for participants

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	**1.00**	**2.00**	**1.5304**	**.50126**
n1	70.00	96.00	84.2679	6.44837
n2	73.00	93.00	83.4286	5.43677
n3	70.00	92.00	80.7321	4.85608
w1	71.00	95.00	83.5593	6.05512
w2	74.00	96.00	84.8814	4.93434
w3	73.00	94.00	85.4407	5.11007

2.4. Results

2.4.1. Individual Parallel Classes

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the final exam scores for *n1* and *w1* classes. There was no significant difference in scores for n1 (M =84.26, SD = 6.44) and w1 (M = 83.55, SD = 12.36; t = 1.42). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 2.64, 95% CI: −1.033 to 6.270) was small.

For *n2* and *w2* classes there was no significant difference in scores for n2 (M =83.42, SD = 5.43) and w2 (M = 84.88, SD = 5.43; t = -1.50). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 4.93, 95% CI: −1.033 to 6.270) was small. However, for *n3* and *w3* classes there was significant difference in scores for n3 (M =80.73, SD = 4.85) and w3 (M = 85.44, SD = 5.11; t = -5.06). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -4.70, 95% CI: −6.55 to 2.86) was significant.

2.4.2. The Control Group and the Treatment Group as a Whole

For Σn and Σw there was no significant difference in scores for Σn (M =248.42, SD = 10.56) and Σw (M = 251.94, SD = 14.81; t = -1.46). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -3.52, 95% CI: −8.29 to 1.21) was small.

2.4.3. The Mean Scores Considering Gender Factor

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the Σn and Σw mean scores for males and females. There was no significant difference in scores for males (M = 254.57, SD = 11.54) and females (M = 253.17, SD = 9.54; t = .50). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 1.39, 95% CI: -4.13 to 6.91) was small.

For *n3* and *w3* groups there was significant difference in scores for males (M = 87.13, SD = 3.98) and females (M = 83.69, SD = 5.60; t = 2.72). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 3.44, 95% CI: .91 to 5.99) was significant.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Emphasis has recently shifted from one where students readily repeat back known facts to one where they are encouraged to take control of their own learning so as to construct meaningful knowledge for themselves. Adapting to this modern view on education may not be easy for many educators and learners as most of them are more prone to set back into the "provide information" then "test knowledge" mode (Pappas, 1998). That passive mode requires much less energy or engagement on the part of learners, so some may be resistant to any new change. The most crucial key to success is providing students with opportunities so they feel they have choices. Seeing as self-assessment requires being involved in different intricate cognitive, sociological and psychological processes, which are influenced by many uncontrollable factors, there still remains lack of a consensus about the effective use of self-assessment in EFL contexts. Part of this inconsistency stems from emergence of many different similar concepts studied and discussed by researchers in the literature including 'self-evaluation, 'self-rating', 'self-appraisal' and so forth (Saito, 2003). Though there are many challenges in the path of utilizing self-assessment effectively and appropriately, our striving for removing the hurdles provide precious insights into the nature of language teaching and evaluation (Hamayan,1995; McNamara & Deane,1995; Oscarson,1989; Peirce, Swain & Hart,1993; Strong-Klause,2000). The focus of this study was 'development-oriented self-assessment' according to which the learners are assessed for an extended period in order to detect changes and patterns of development over specific period of time (Bachman, 2000; Haughton & Dickinson, 1988). The other type of self-assessment, which is normally placed in an opposite direction, is 'performance-oriented self-assessment' according to which the testees' performance is assessed at one particular point in time (Oscarson, 1989; Saito, 2003).

In answer to the first research question, there was not found a significance relationship between filling out formative self-assessment checklists and summative final assessment for all the classes as a whole. However, for the more advanced learners (third semester), the relationship was statistically significant. According to Renzulli (1997), as learners become more advanced, they are more committed to the tasks assigned to them. As Andretta (2008) indicated, advanced learners are more successful to find their way through information in new unfamiliar situations. As learners become more advanced, they come to terms with many new experiences; "they need *acceleration* so that they can progress through the curriculum at their learning pace, which is significantly faster than those at their lower level. They need at least some *creative experiences* so that they can experiment, invent, and apply what they've learned. They need materials with which to work their ideas and explore new lines of inquiry. Many also need *sensitive handling*, as they may feel socially isolated because of their passion for learning" (Smutney, 2011, p. 7). Correspondingly, in the present study more advanced learners benefited more from the 'creative experience' of self-assessment. The results of this study also supports these findings: the more advanced level EFL learners benefited more than upper-intermediate and intermediate ones.

With regard to the third research question, the overall analysis of data for male and female students did not show any significant difference. There is a dearth of research about gender differences on the effectiveness of EFL self-assessment. Van Krayenoord and Paris (1997) reported developmental trends in self-assessment in both males and females.

Even though younger learners can start to use self-assessment to evaluate their achievements, older students are more effective at the process (McDonald, 2004). Yet, there are differences within older students based on their levels of ability and the quality of teaching practices in particular classrooms (Adams & King, 1995, McDonald, 2004). Better development in males' and females' metacognitive abilities showed itself in better ability for self-reflection and self-regulation of learning (Adams & King, 1995, McAlpine, 2000). Effectiveness of learners` self-assessment and self-evaluation in both

males and females develops with age, experience, intelligence, academic achievement and the quality of instruction (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson & Enna, 1978; McDonald, 2004; Ormerod, 1975; Paris & Cunningham, 1996; Van Krayenoord & Paris, 1997).The evidence seems to be strong that males and females of high ability tended to underestimate their own performances while students of lesser ability tend to overestimate their performances; however, when males and females focus their self-assessments on clear criteria and standards this tendency was diminished (Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Meece, & Wessels, 1982; Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 1997; Stipek & Maciver, 1989; Van Krayenoord & Paris, 1997). Van Krayenoord and Paris (1997) found that self-assessment was correlated with gender differences as females provided more sophisticated and elaborate responses than males. Andrade (2000) asked 47 seventh graders to invent, apply and explain a classification system for a group of animals. Treatment group used a written rubric that listed the criteria for each task and gradations of quality for each criterion. Students in the control group were not asked to assess their work. Treatment students outscored the control group on posttests. This finding is line with result of implementing self-assessment checklist for advanced learners participating in this study.

Goodrich (1997) studied the effects of instructional rubrics and guided self-assessment on students' writing and understandings of good writing. Based on the findings, he reported that rubric-referenced self-assessment has a positive effect on females' writing but no effect on males' writing. Goodrich`s finding supports finding of this study only for the third group of learners participating in this study in which female students showed a significant better performance than male students on the final exam. The fact that males and females did not differ much on their final assessments scores supports the notion of similitude between learning process of males and females.

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Appendix

Standard Self-assessment checklist

	EXCELLENT 20 pts	GOOD 15 pts	FAIR 10 pts	POOR 5 pts	CONCLUSION
PREPAREDNESS	EXCELLENT __ Prepared EVERY day __On time every day	GOOD __ Unprepared ONE DAY __ late one day	FAIR __ Unprepared TWO OR MORE times __ late 2 or 3 days	POOR __ Unprepared EVERY DAY __ late 4 or 5 days	CONCLUSION _____ points
HOMEWORK	EXCELLENT __ ALL homework submitted on time, complete, accurate __ Neatly done with	GOOD __ Homework was late ONE day this week __ OVER HALF of required work submitted __ Homework not written in agenda ONE DAY this week	FAIR __ 2 OR MORE late homework assignments __ 1 OR MORE missing homework assignments __ Often incomplete __ Many errors (LESS THAN HALF correct)	POOR __ No homework was submitted this week __ Homework	CONCLUSION _____ points
CLASSWORK	EXCELLENT __All classwork was completed on time __ All required work submitted	GOOD __ Classwork was complete, but some was late __ OVER HALF of required work submitted __Work is mostly accurate __ Work is SOMETIMES incomplete	FAIR __ MOST classwork was done __ Assignments complete, bit with LESS THAN HALF of required work shown __ Classwork was done with MANY errors	POOR __ No classwork was done	CONCLUSION _____ points

EFFORT/ATTITUDE	EXCELLENT	GOOD	FAIR	POOR	CONCLUSION
	__ I ALWAYS have a positive attitude	__ I have a positive attitude MOST of the time	__ I SOMETIMES have a positive attitude (complain sometimes)	__ I had a NEGATIVE attitude most of the time (complain a lot)	_____ points
	_ I tried VERY HARD	__ I try MOST of the time	__ I try SOME of the time	_ I put forth VERY LITTLE EFFORT	
	__ I ALWAYS take responsibility for my own learning (It is my job to make sure I understand!) __ ALWAYS ask questions when I need help	__ I ask questions MOST of the time when I need help	SOMETIMES ask questions when I need to	__ I HARDLY EVER ask questions when I need to	
	__ ALWAYS listen very carefully when the teacher is talking	Listen carefully MOST of the time when the teacher is talking	Listen carefully SOME of the time when the teacher is talking	__ I ignore the teacher when she is talking	
	Very motivated and alert to study	__ Sleepy SOME of the time	__ Sleepy MOST of the time	__ Sleepy MOST days	