Integrating Self-Assessment in Higher Education for Developing Master's Students' Self-Reflection and Autonomy in Learning

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Abstract

"Assessment for learning" has recently been at the center of instructors' attention in educational contexts since it is not only goal-oriented, but it also helps students and instructors regulate their learning and teaching according to course objectives and students' progress. Among the various types of assessment for learning practices, self-assessment is a practical technique that enables students to reflect on their learning, develop practical learning strategies, and discover useful ways of compensating their learning problems, which turns them into independent and responsible lifelong learners. The purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of self-assessment in masters' level French Language-Teaching seminars in order to investigate whether this type of assessment promotes improvements in students' practical knowledge and skills as well as self-reflection and autonomy. Two groups of French Teaching Master's students at the University of Tehran in Iran participated in this research over a period of two semesters. During the first semester, both groups were assessed by the instructor. During the second semester, however, the first group (control group) continued to be assessed by the instructor whereas in the second group (experimental group), students were responsible for assessing their learning throughout the semester. The overall students' performance in the two seminars was compared and analyzed at the end of both semesters, along with a questionnaire distributed among the experimental group students at the end of the second semester in order to examine whether self-assessment enhanced students' learning, and whether it helped them develop self-reflection and critical thinking regarding their learning and learning strategies. Results indicated significant improvement in the experimental group students' performance, and made them more conscious about their learning strategies, more responsible for their learning, and more independent and autonomous in their educational career.

Keywords: *Self-assessment, Higher education, Self-Reflection, Autonomy, Iran.*

1. Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Assessment, according to Louis Porcher [1] is the key to learning. It reflects course objectives and teaching procedures, orients students and instructors' learning and teaching, and demonstrates students' learning and achievement. In recent years, a growing tendency toward "assessment *for* learning", as opposed to "assessment *of* learning" has been witnessed in educational contexts, since "assessment *for* learning" is not only goal oriented, but it also helps students and instructors regulate their learning and teaching according to course objectives. Among the various types of assessment *for* learning practices, self-assessment is a practical technique that enables students to reflect on their learning, investigate their learning gaps, and find ways of compensating their learning problems. Self-assessment may be defined as "the involvement of learners in making judgements about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning" [2], "identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards" [3]. It is a procedure in which students assess the quality of their learning and measure the achievement of their learning outcomes according to specific criteria. Self-assessment is a valuable learning instrument in that it does not only provide information for grading, but also encourages students to participate in and become responsible for their learning process by being the ones to indicate whether they have achieved their desired objectives. Students therefore learn to monitor their learning and progress in order to achieve their goals. Self-assessment is a widely used assessment technique in various educational contexts [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]. In Iran, however, self-assessment is not yet extensively considered as an efficient learning tool since students and instructors do not seem to fully trust this method of assessment.

In language learning, self-assessment has mostly been used in language classes. However, Master's degree seminars in *Language Teaching* seem to require special attention since students in these seminars are trained to be future *instructors*, teaching *languages.* As future *teachers*, these students need to develop self-regulation, self-evaluation, self-reflection, and a critical and analytic approach

toward their teaching in order to regularly assess their teaching capacities and their strengths and weaknesses. As *language* instructors, they need to learn self-assessment practices and implement them in their future classes because languages are lifelong learning tasks; their learning is not limited within the boundaries of classrooms. Languages, whether they are learned as first, second or foreign languages, are not only taught and learned within a specific time, but are rather learned throughout life in various situations and interactions.

The purpose of this study is to explore the potential to use self-assessment as an effective method in Master's French Language Teaching seminars to orient students' learning, make them more independent in their learning, teach them self-reflection practices, and develop self-awareness, self-regulation and autonomy. Therefore, the main question addressed in this research is "Does the implementation of self-assessment at Master's level language-teaching seminars make students more responsible and independent in their learning, and more conscious about their learning process, time management and goal achievement?" Based on the above question, the following hypothesis has been formulated: The implementation of self-assessment practices at master's level French language-teaching seminars enables students to first set specific goals for their learning, and then develop a goal-oriented learning process in a timely manner, which makes them more responsible and more independent in their learning.

2. Research Context and Methodology

This study was performed at two Master's level French Language-Teaching seminars at the University of Tehran in Iran from 2018-2019. Students in both groups were aged 23-45, with an average age of 25 in the control group and 23 in the experimental group. Group 1, the control group, was composed of 11 female and 1 male students, and group 2, the experimental group, was composed of 12 female students. The research, which mainly took a descriptive and an experimental form, was performed throughout two semesters. During the first semester in a French Language-Teaching seminar titled "Principles of Language Teaching and Learning," both control and experimental groups were asked to write a lesson summary at the end of each session. These summaries were collected by the instructor, assessed and graded using a rubric. At the end of the first semester, students' overall performance was assessed through an identical final exam and an identical final project. In the second semester in a seminar titled "Language Course Design," the control group continued to write the weekly summaries to be graded by the instructor. Students in the experimental group, however, did not write the summary. At the beginning of the semester, they were asked to set a series of outcomes they wished to accomplish by the end of the seminar based on the general course subject and objectives; they then responded to a series of self-assessment questions at the end of each session, instead of writing their summaries. These questions asked them to reflect on the lesson's main objectives, the parts of the lesson that were well understood and those in which they had problems, the way in which they evaluate their learning of the new material, and the way in which the lesson helped them approach/achieve their initial course outcomes.

At the end of the second semester, students in the experimental group were asked to answer a questionnaire about their perceptions of the self-assessment used in class. This research is therefore a descriptive and experimental study, in which the data for the two groups were described, compared, and discussed in order to investigate whether self-assessment is an effective assessment technique in higher education for improving students' performance and helping them develop lifelong learning strategies.

3. Findings and Discussion

A comparison of both groups' students' final grade average indicates that in the first semester, the control group students' average course grade was 16.25/20 and the experimental group students' average grade was 16/20. These grades were rather similar; no significant difference was observed between the two groups' initial state. In the second semester, however, the control group students' average course grade was 15.9/20 whereas the experimental group students' average grade was 17.85/20. This improvement is rather significant, given the fact that except the change in self-assessment, every other part of the two courses were identical. These data seem to suggest that self-assessment has had a positive influence on students' overall learning.

The analysis of the experimental group's questionnaire revealed that 62% of students acknowledged that compared to instructor assessment, self-assessment helped them better determine the state of their knowledge/skills. They believed that they learned in a more practical way (92%), which means that self-assessment helped them become practical "users" of the learned knowledge and skills (75%), since they meticulously and methodically analyzed the state of their learning, determined their weak

and strong points (82%) and found ways of compensating them. In addition, self-assessment helped students in determining personal goals (74%) and analyzing the way in which they achieved these goals (75%). 91% of students believed they achieved their initial goals by the end of the semester. 66% believed that assessing their learning made them more successful in time management; 85% acknowledged that assessing their learning/goal achievement made them more responsible for their learning since they themselves had to monitor their learning in a way that they would successfully achieve their goals and pass the class. 74% of students considered themselves more independent in their learning, which, along with becoming more time-efficient and responsible, made them more competent learners, capable of measuring and processing the amount and quality of their learning without direct help from the instructor. 91% believed that self-assessment helped them better understand the way in which they learn, and 83% considered self-assessment a tool that helped them better organize their knowledge and skills. Self-assessment therefore helped students recognize and strengthen effective learning strategies, and efficiently organize the newly learned information to make it more accessible and usable. In addition, students learned to reflect not only on learning, but also on the underlying processes responsible for learning (74%), which helped them develop more practical and personalized learning profiles, becoming more confident both in learning and in the selection of effective learning strategies (74%). These results, although not representative of every master's seminar context in Iranian universities, seem to confirm the positive influences of implementing self-assessment as an assessment tool as well as a learning instrument for developing students' learning and stimulating students' development of effective learning strategies.

4. Conclusion

As indicated by this research's data, self-assessment, as a practical "assessment *for* learning" instrument, should be strongly considered in higher education to actively engage students in the process of learning and assessment. At the same time, if used correctly, self-assessment should help students set and achieve learning outcomes, reflect on their learning process, pinpoint their weak and strong points, and find/apply effective strategies for compensating their main areas of difficulties. Such learners reflect the "utopiaic" image of a responsible, independent, lifelong learner, which should be the ultimate result of higher education in Iran.

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