

Learner self-assessment and the European Language Portfolio

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Abstract

Even though the value of learner self-assessment has been long acknowledged in theory, it does not yet play a central role in assessment practices in formal education. This paper is based on the conviction that learner self-assessment of second / foreign language (L2) achievement and proficiency has the potential to enhance the quality of L2 learning, teaching and assessment and also to address, to an extent, the contemporary concerns of modern society (e.g. education for democratic citizenship, lifelong learning etc.). It is argued that the best way to introduce self-assessment in formal language learning contexts is through the European Language Portfolio (ELP) developed by the Council of Europe. Specific ways of accommodating ELP self-assessment into external assessment (by teachers and examinations) are put forward along with some of the necessary prerequisites and reforms for successful implementation.

Keywords: self-assessment, language learning, European Language Portfolio

1. The need for learner self-assessment in L2 education

Learner self-assessment should form an integral part of the pedagogic process in all educational systems that claim to view learners and their needs from a holistic perspective because it satisfies learners' educational, emotional, psychological and social needs and promotes their self-actualization.

In specific, self-assessment is valuable for learners because it promotes their personal growth (both emotional and intellectual). Through the process of self-assessment, which requires critical reflection and introspection, learners develop critical-analytical skills and a better self-awareness. Furthermore, by being treated as equal partners in the learning and assessment processes, their self-esteem and self-respect are enhanced and they develop a positive self-concept since their opinions are valued. This has, in turn, a positive impact on their motivation which constitutes a key feature of successful learners (Ushioda 1996).

At a pedagogical level, a shift from authoritarian control by teachers to a more learner-centred ethos in language education requires learners' active involvement in all pedagogical procedures. Considering that learners are involved in shaping the learning and teaching processes, it would be unreasonable to exclude them from the evaluation

of these and of their own performance (Little 2005: 322). Additionally, the emphasis on learning itself, rather than simply the measurement of that learning, and the attempts to strengthen the links between assessment and learning, will unavoidably lead us to the threshold of learner self-assessment. This can be understood considering the consciousness-raising function of self-assessment. By being responsible for the evaluation of their own learning process and learning outcomes, learners can ‘appreciate their strengths, recognise their weaknesses and orient their learning more effectively’ (Council of Europe 2001: 192). As a result, the assessment process becomes more transparent and this clear understanding of the process helps learners to achieve their short and long-term goals more easily.

The need to have learners’ input on the evaluation of their performance becomes evident as soon as one considers that some affective and psychological factors and aspects of personal and social development that impinge on their observable performance are inaccessible to assessment by others (Brown 1990: 9). These factors can be for instance learners’ ability to evaluate the effort they make, how hard they work, how far they think they have achieved their objectives and how the work relates to their own personal goals etc.

The importance of self-assessment is also reinforced by the fact that it is an effective means of achieving what one might claim is the chief aim of L2 education, that is, learner autonomy. According to Little (2002: 51 – 52), the three cornerstones of learner autonomy are *empowerment*, *reflection* and *appropriate target language use*. Self-assessment accommodates all these three principles, since learners cannot assess their progress unless they step back and reflect. Through this process, learners are empowered because they gradually become responsible for their actions. By encouraging learners to record their reflections and personal judgments (orally and in writing) in the target language (TL), their linguistic proficiency is promoted because they think in the TL, which, in a way, constitutes genuine communication in its own right (Dam 1995: 50); therefore, they develop autonomy in terms of language use in addition to autonomy in terms of regulating the process and content of learning (Little 2007).

Given that in our constantly evolving society there is an increasing need for constant updating of skills and lifelong learning, another key educational aim is helping learners to develop the skills of learning how to learn. In terms of assessment practices, these skills can be achieved primarily through learner self-assessment. This is because critical

reflection conducted in the TL for purposes of self-assessment focusing on language as an ‘object’ and a ‘system’ cultivates learners’ metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness and helps them to understand how they learn.

Learner self-assessment can also prevent some of the negative effects of unilateral assessment; for instance dependence and conformity (Heron 1981) and intellectual alienation, meaning that students assimilate masses of information which do not correspond to their interests and learning needs (Heron 1988: 81). Rather than being dependent on the teacher, learners are viewed as equal partners in a classroom community where ‘success depends on the distribution of responsibilities across all participants’ (Little 2003b: 228). This fosters a culture of democracy and results in symmetrical power relations in the classroom.

On this evidence and from a sociological perspective, the value of self-assessment is in line with current concerns with education for democratic citizenship, according to which ‘it is not enough merely to teach about the various modes of democratic participation: students at all levels must also have first-hand experience of the participatory process’ (Little 1999: 7). Therefore, learners must be nurtured within a climate of democracy and also exercise it at a practical level themselves. Having the responsibility of self-assessment is one means of achieving this.

For all of these reasons, learner self-assessment should acquire a legitimate status within assessment procedures in formal L2 education in order for educational systems to promote learners’ holistic growth and to be consistent with the tenets of progressive and humanist pedagogies. One effective way of introducing and establishing self-assessment of foreign language achievement and proficiency in L2 education is through the ELP.

2. The ELP as an instrument for self-assessment

The ELP is a language learning and reporting instrument developed by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe. It consists of:

- (a) a *language passport* which summarises the learner’s linguistic identity, language learning and language qualifications in an internationally transparent manner,
- (b) a *language biography* which enables learners to assess themselves, set learning targets, monitor their progress and record learning and intercultural experiences, and

(c) a *dossier* in which learners keep samples of work that best represent their L2 proficiency.

The ELP serves a double function: (a) its documentation and reporting function enables learners to record their proficiency in different languages and their learning experiences in a comprehensive, comparable and transparent way so that they can be widely recognized across Europe, (b) its pedagogical function lies in the fact that it enhances learners' motivation and helps them to reflect on their learning experiences, plan their learning and learn autonomously. These two functions of the ELP are complementary and they are performed through learner self-assessment (Little 2005: 325).

Language learners are engaged in a constant process of formative and summative self-assessment in the three components of the ELP for pedagogical and reporting purposes respectively on the basis of the common reference levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001).

In the *language passport*, learners provide an overview of their language proficiency, according to six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) and five skills (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing), at a certain time, using the scales and descriptors of the CEFR. This is a summative form of self-assessment as the focus is on the outcome of the L2 learning process and it serves a reporting function since learners provide a record of their linguistic proficiency and cultural skills to inform external educational authorities, future employers, etc.

In the *language biography*, learners are invited to assess their learning progress according to functional 'I can' checklists arranged by levels and skills on a regular basis. This component invites learners to reflect on and assess the 'process aspect' of learning which implies formative self-assessment that becomes, as Little and Perclovà (2001: 55) argue, 'as much a habit of mind as an activity' because it forms an integral part of the language learning experience. These 'I can' checklists have multiple functions because they not only provide assessment criteria for self-assessment and assessment by others, but they also reflect learning and teaching objectives and suggest communicative tasks and activities. In this way, the ELP constitutes an interface between learning, teaching and assessment as learning, teaching, self-assessment and assessment through testing and examinations, can all be oriented to the same behavioural descriptors (Little 2005: 323).

As far as the *dossier* is concerned, learners have to think critically when selecting samples of their work to prove the claims made in the passport and biography and need to regularly update these samples as their proficiency level changes. Once again, this presupposes learners who are capable of assessing their level of proficiency in order to select the appropriate samples of their work to include in or exclude from the dossier.

There seems to be a relationship of interdependence between summative and formative self-assessment in the ELP:

“whether its function is summative or formative, self-assessment depends on the same complex of knowledge, self-knowledge and skills, which means that learners are likely to be more proficient in performing summative self-assessment if formative self-assessment ... has been an integral part of their learning experience”.

(Little and Perclovà 2001: 55)

Given that the ELP is the property of the owner, this principle of learner ownership applies to the pedagogical procedures that the ELP stimulates including assessment. In other words, ‘teacher assessment should always be separate [from learners’ self-assessment] and not used to correct it’ (Council of Europe 2006: 11). However, ‘separate spaces for assessment by others must be available elsewhere’ (*ibid.*: 5). Thus, self-assessment should be separate from but combined with and scaffolded by teacher assessment. In this way, learners’ responsibility for self-assessment is respected and, at the same time, the teacher’s mediating role in developing self-assessment skills is emphasised.

ELP self-assessment and external assessment (by teachers and through public examinations) are not mutually exclusive because ‘self-assessment is based on the learner’s capacity to reflect on his or her own knowledge, skills and achievement, while assessment by others provides an external, objective measure of the same knowledge, skills and achievement’ (Little and Perclovà 2001: 57). It would be a mistake to assume that ELP self-assessment is superior in its educational effects to any other type of assessment, since it is based on a different philosophy of learning and teaching and addresses different educational needs and goals (Kohonen 1999: 286). On this evidence, both ELP assessment and external assessment are essential for effective educational practice and should be combined in a constructive way.

3. Integrating ELP assessment into assessment procedures in formal L2 education

Self-assessment through the ELP components can be introduced in different ways in the language classroom. Some teachers may decide to begin with the dossier. In this case, learners are initially encouraged to collect the best samples of their work for inclusion in the dossier and, at a later stage, they are introduced to the language biography where the teacher explains how they can set learning goals and evaluate their progress. The presentation of the language passport comes at an even later stage whereby learners are shown how to use the common reference levels to assess and summarise their overall linguistic identity. Alternatively, the language passport can be used as a starting point. Learners can be asked to evaluate the degree of their proficiency in the TL and they can then proceed to the language biography to set their individual targets. Within the progress of the language course, they should insert samples of work in the dossier as evidence for their attestations made in the biography. At the end of the course, the passport can be revisited to assess what has been achieved (see Little and Perclovà 2001: 16).

In either approach, formative and summative self-assessment through the biography and the dossier respectively can be easily integrated into everyday classroom activities. Learners can use the biography checklists on a regular basis and become engaged in a cyclical pedagogical process of setting goals, planning and monitoring learning, evaluating progress and setting new targets; all of which entail reflective self-evaluation. Accordingly, updating samples of work in the dossier should also take place regularly in order to demonstrate and provide evidence for language learning progress.

The dossier can be used to engage learners in systematic summative self-assessment. At the end of each instructional unit they can select assignments and present them orally in peer groups justifying their choices. Then, they can exchange dossiers with members of the group for peer assessment on the basis of criteria set by the teacher. Finally, having received peer feedback, they can assess their own dossiers on their own. Feedback by the teacher should also be provided after the peer and self-assessment processes. Next, students can plan their learning in cooperation with the teacher. In the Finnish ELP pilot project (Päkkilä 2003), for instance, self-assessment for summative purposes took place through the dossier at the end of secondary school 'to explore the potential of the ELP as a school-leaving reporting tool and to give the students an experience of how they might update their ELPs in the future on their own' (*ibid.*: 8).

Formative and summative ELP self-assessment should be continuously guided and supported by the teacher. Learners' personal judgements recorded in the ELP should be evaluated against their performance in language tests and compared with teacher evaluations (resulting, for instance, through classroom observation). This dialectic scheme of assessment, in which the results from the ELP self-assessment are combined with external institutionalised assessment, can produce reliable conclusions about learning outcomes, feed back into learning and teaching practices, validate learner self-assessment and encourage learners to be honest and realistic.

Regardless of its different ways of implementation in the classroom, ELP self-assessment can be challenging for learners and teachers alike, particularly in educational contexts where unilateral assessment by teachers and norm-referenced examinations have been traditionally considered the standard assessment procedures. Therefore, the successful adoption of this alternative approach to assessment requires learner training, which, in turn, presupposes teacher education.

In order to prepare learners to assume responsibility for the assessment of their language achievement and proficiency through the ELP, teachers should try to expand learners' role to assessment procedures in a gradual fashion. Oscarson (1997: 184) describes the degrees of support in the assessment process in three stages (i) the dependent (full dependence on external assessment), (ii) the co-operative (collaborative self- and external assessment) and (iii) the independent (full reliance on independent self-assessment). This continuum implies that full reliance on independent self-assessment may result through phases of dependence. It is thus through the process of developing skills on how to assess others that the capacity for self-assessment develops because by applying criteria to someone else's performance, learners acquire a clearer understanding of these criteria themselves and the assessment process becomes more transparent (Race, Brown and Smith 2005: 131). On this evidence, collaborative assessment between teacher and learners and peer assessment should serve as preparatory phases before the stage where learners are invited to use the ELP for self-assessment.

Given the interdependence between language learning, teaching and assessment, effective ELP self-assessment calls for appropriate teaching practices as well. Communicative and learner-centred approaches to teaching are required and conscious pedagogical practices that respond to the complexity of developing learner autonomy and self-assessment skills. Using Bruner's terms (1961), the 'expository' mode of

teaching, which is still prevalent in many L2 classrooms, should be replaced by the ‘hypothetical’ mode that allows learners to assume responsibilities and take initiatives. Teaching practices should be informed by constructivist theories of learning which postulate that each learner has different personal constructs, i.e., different perceptions of reality which are shaped by previous knowledge and experience. These constructs are important because they affect new learning (Carlyle and Jordan 2005: 19). Thus, language teachers need to acknowledge the diversity of learners’ constructs and accept that they cannot fully determine what their learners learn. Accepting learners’ individual understandings would more naturally lead to the acceptance of individual interpretations and opinions that result from their self-assessments. In short, there is a need for coherence and consistency among assessment, teaching and learning practices as:

“...adopting portfolio assessment in a strongly teacher-structured learning environment may not be successful because the learner’s self-assessment needs space for self-directed and negotiated learning. Similarly, developing learner-centred classroom practices while adhering strictly to teacher-controlled testing procedures undermines the teacher’s authenticity as a learner-centred educator”.

(Kohonen 1999: 281)

The above points carry implications for teacher education since, clearly, learner self-assessment is very different from conventional assessment practices and enabling learners to undertake it requires a greater level of professional awareness and professional sophistication than has usually been the case. Thus, teachers need to be assessment literate and reflective practitioners (Schön 1983) in order to help their learners to develop a capacity for reflection which is necessary for self-assessment. They should engage in critical thinking concerning their teaching, examine the underlying philosophies of their practices and consider alternative approaches. Reflective journals and teaching portfolios constitute effective means of stimulating this kind of reflective inquiry.

In addition to learner and teacher training and changes in teaching practices, reforms of examinations and L2 curricula are also needed to bring them in line with an ELP-oriented pedagogy.

Accommodating ELP self-assessment into formal assessment requires a reconciliation between public examinations and the ELP; this can be achieved by

introducing a portfolio-oriented element in final examinations. Learners' ELPs, for instance, could be used for the examination of their oral proficiency (Little 2003a: 33). Students could present their portfolios to the examiners and the oral presentation of ELP by individual learners would offer opportunities for spontaneous questions and answers in the TL (Little 2003b: 233). In this case, the ELP can serve as a means of reforming examination systems so that they become consistent with the ELP philosophy and changes in language education in general (for instance, revising examinations to bring them into line with the common reference levels, conducting interviews based on group projects between examiners and learners to examine learners' oral proficiency, reform of marking schemes by establishing 'rubrics' for grading purposes, i.e., scoring guides which consist of 'a set of criteria and marks or grades associated with these criteria' (Kennedy 2007: 67) or introducing a double level of assessment according to which students are assessed at two levels: CEFR level and mark).

Given that self-assessment in the ELP is conducted against the common reference levels of the CEFR, these levels should be used for the 'constructive alignment' of L2 curricula (Biggs 2003) that is, 'designing of curricula so that the teaching activities, learning activities and assessment tasks are coordinated with the learning outcomes' (Kennedy 2007: 77). For instance, the official curriculum for lower and upper secondary learners in Ireland was analysed against the illustrative scales in the CEFR and then appropriate descriptors for the goal-setting / self-assessment checklists were selected for the Irish ELP. In this way, the common reference levels allow an approach to curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment from the same communicative perspective.

4. Conclusion

This paper discussed the value of self-assessment for L2 learners from a holistic perspective, it suggested some concrete ways of introducing self-assessment in formal L2 educational settings through the Council of Europe's ELP, and it also touched upon the necessary prerequisites for successful implementation. On the whole, it is argued that ELP self-assessment can have a positive impact on L2 learning, teaching and assessment when it is scaffolded by and combined with external assessment (teacher assessment and language testing). But like any other innovation in the field of education, formalizing the status of ELP self-assessment in L2 pedagogy entails a complex and gradual process which presupposes a number of reforms in teaching

practices, L2 curricula and examinations. If one accepts, however, that it is the pedagogical rather than the reporting function of assessment that really matters, it then follows that by supporting the use of ELP-based assessment, we are moving towards the right direction.

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