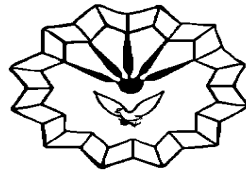


In the name of the Almighty



Razi University

Faculty of Literature & Humanities

Department of English Language & Literature

M.A. Thesis

Title:

**Investigating Javanroodian Students' Ability in English Oral
Performance Self- assessment**

Supervisor:

Dr. Nouroddin Yousofi

Advisor:

Dr. Ferdos Jamali

By:

Roghayeh Hooshangi

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Abstract

The developing discourse which moves assessment away from a measurement model towards one of learner empowerment and the development of assessment for lifelong learning sets the context for this thesis. The aim was to investigate the Javanroodian learners' ability in self assessing their oral performance in English in the presence of teacher feedback. The assessment program involved training, practice, video- taping, feedback, assessment and discussion. 20 EFL students of foreign language institutes in Javanrood participated in the study, which were divided into an experimental group and a control group, based on the results of English oral performance pre- tests. The research instrument consisted of a self-assessment checklist containing subcategories related to the organization of the presentation, content, linguistic factors (vocabulary use, grammatical rules and pronunciation) and interaction with the audience. It was developed as a result of interviewing participants and their teachers and then adapting results based on the results of reviewing available checklists in the literature. The data was collected by the experimental group members' self-assessments of their 6 oral performances and the teacher's assessment of their performances. The obtained data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential methods, including computing average and correlation of learners' self- assessment and teacher's assessment, T-test and χ^2 formulas. Results indicated that 1. The ability of learners' in self assessing their oral performance increased through time and by practice. 2. Participating in self- assessment process had positive effect on learners' oral performance ability, and 3. There were high correlations between learners' self- assessment and teacher's assessments. Results will have implications for policy makers, material designers and developers, teachers and learners.

Key words: Self- assessment (SA), oral performance, foreign language institutes in Javanrood, Alternative assessment, Formative assessment.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter introduces the present study in a way that, first, the theoretical perspective as well as the significance of the thesis will be clarified. Purpose of the study, statement of the problem will be presented, too. Definition of key terms is the next step. The chapter will come to an end by a brief statement of the thesis organization.

1.2. Theoretical perspective

As Shaaban (2005) pointed out, assessment has the most powerful influence on students learning. Therefore, teachers should always keep enough, and accurate, information on which they can build their judgment to improve their students' performance.

Assessment systems and practices exert considerable constraints on students' learning behavior. The highly individualized set of assumptions about the assessment of students manifest in grades and individual certification is one such limitation. Another is the fragmentation of assessment tasks (and indeed the curriculum) prompted by modularization that inhibits some holistic approaches to assessment. "Most pervasive of all, the treatment of assessment as grading leads students to focus on marks rather than the learning they purport to represent". (Boud and Falchikov, 2006, p. 403). Under intense political pressure, test scores are likely to go up without a corresponding improvement in student learning. (Shepard, 2000)

So, it is essential to seek ways to have the best practice in assessment. Brown, Race & Smith (2005), among the values for best practice in assessment mentioned the following tips:

1. **Assessment should be transparent.** By this they mean that there should not be hidden agendas. There should not be nasty surprises for students. In other word, students should not be playing the game 'what's in the assessors' mind'. In addition

2. Assessment should be in line with the intended learning outcomes, and the links between outcomes and the assessment criteria should be clear.
3. **Assessment should motivate students to learn.** By this they mean that assessment should help students to structure their learning continuously during their studies. In other word, assessment should help students to make informed choices about what to learn, hoe to learn and how best to evidence their achievements.
4. **Assessment should promote deep learning.** This means students should not be driven towards surface learning because of the ways their learning is to be assessed.
5. **Assessment should be formative- even when it is primarily intended to be summative.** As assessment is a time-consuming process for all concerned, it seems like a wasted opportunity if it is not used as a means of letting students know how well they are doing and how they can improve.
6. **Assessment should be timely.** They believe the assessment that occurs only at the end of the learning program is not that much useful because it won't provide students feedback and time to practice before they pass or fail.
7. **Assessment should be incremental.** This means that giving feedback to students should be continuous. There is sense therefore in enabling small units of assessment to build up into a final mark or grade.(p.1-4)

As Oscarson (1989) stated,

seen from the learner's point of view, foreign language skills may be assessed along two fundamentally different lines. They involve:

- a) **Assessment in the form of self-report or SA**, that is, assessment seen in the learner's own perspective; assessment seen as an internal or self-directed activity.
- b) **Assessment in the form of examinations and administration of tests**, that is, assessment seen in the perspective of an 'outside agent', typically a teacher or trained examiner; assessment seen as an external or 'other directed' activity. (p.75)

Attention must be paid to the two key aspects of any type of assessment. It is important to understand not only how assessments are used for measurement but also how they are used in learning itself. The measurement aspect of assessment centers on how best to measure learners' degree of understanding or their mastery of knowledge and skills. The

result is often used for summative purposes such as giving grades to students or examining the accountability of educational programs.

The learning aspect of assessment relates to its potential role in advancing students' learning. By providing students with opportunities to evaluate their performance as well as giving them feedback based on the results of their assessment, students can become more aware of their own learning process and performance, and in turn they can become more proficient in learning.

Traditionally, assessment was largely terminal, with learners being assessed on the work of a course or a major section thereof after they had finished working through the course or section. Now, the trend is more and more towards continuous assessment, with the learners being assessed as they actually work through the course or section. Assessment is also becoming much more learner centered, since it is being increasingly accepted that assessment is (or, at any rate should be) an integral part of the learning process - not simply something that is 'done to learners' after the real learning process is over. Partly because of this, the nature of assessment has also undergone a major change in recent years, with assessment methods becoming much more varied in character, since they are much more geared towards helping learners to learn. One important manifestation of this has been an increasing involvement of the learners themselves in the assessment process.

The interest in more learner- centered instruction has changed the way many of teachers think about teaching as well as what they do in the classroom. They are devoting more energy to getting students involved during class. They are trying to give them more opportunities to practice the learning skills that expedite learning. Nowadays teachers let students summarize the content; rather than doing it for them. They try to have them ask more questions than they do. They design activities which encourage them to learn from and with each other. However, such changes have not been accompanied by corresponding changes in assessment practices. And the evaluation of student work remains completely under teacher control. However, assessment practices have started to change over the last several years with teachers building a larger repertoire of assessment tools and strategies. There is a greater understanding of the importance of timely assessments for learning as well as regular assessments of learning.

On the other hand, there is a growing pressure on teachers to be held accountable for external objective tests and other summative assessments have been observed in many parts of the world, and Iran is no exception. There has been a growing recognition that revising for tests is not the same as acquiring and developing deep understanding of the test, its purpose and content.

In addition, "teachers are taking more interest in assessment for learning in which they target their own and their students' actions increasingly precisely upon the next steps in learning for individuals" (McDonald & Boud, 2003, p. 215).

Many have argued that teachers should help students construct knowledge through active involvement in assessing their own learning performance, and that students are empowered by gaining ownership of their learning and life-long learning skills. Research on language pedagogy especially recommends that teachers should provide opportunities for students to assess their language level so as to help them focus on their own learning (Blanche, 1988; Blue, 1994; Dickinson, 1987; Harris, 1997; Henner-Stanchina & Holec, 1985; Oscarsson, 1989).

Self-assessment (SA), as one type of alternative assessment, with the increased attention to learner-centered curricula, needs analysis, and learner autonomy has gained popularity in recent years and its potential value as an instructional tool to facilitate learning as well as a measurement tool has been a topic of much discussion (Blanche, 1988; Boud, 1995; Butler and Lee, 2010). The increasing interest in such methods has been driven by increasing recognition of the need to engage learners as active participants in the learning process and to equip them with the skills required to be effective life-long learners. (Wood, 2009)

Brown, Race & Smith (2005) believed that there are many levels on which students' SA can be used. Then they stated some suggestions to help to decide when to introduce SA into courses. The following tips are some of those suggestions:

1. **Make SA an integral part of learning.** Help students become lifelong learners who can evaluate their own performance after they have finished formal study.

2. **Consider what no one but students can really assess.** For instance, only students can give a rating on how much effort they put into a task, how strong their motivation is in a particular subject.
3. **Support students in SA.** Give them lots of guidance at the outset, then progressively let them take greater degree of responsibility for their assessment as their understanding of the process matures.
4. **Help students to get grips with the assessment criteria.** Let them discuss what the criteria will mean in practice, and get them to describe exactly what sorts of performance or evidence will demonstrate achievement of the criteria.
5. **Use SA to establish existing competence.** SA exercises and tests can be a quick way of enabling students to establish how much of their prior learning is relevant to the prerequisite knowledge for their next course. This can help students avoid wasting time studying things they have already achieved well enough.
6. **Suggest that students use video to informally self-assess their presentation skills.** Watching video tapes of their own performance in the comfort of privacy can allow students to reflect very deeply on their skills. (p. 144- 146)

1.3. Statement of the problem

In the educational system of Iran students start learning English from junior high school and continue it till the end of the pre- university courses. It means they spend 7 years studying English in formal education systems. In addition, those learners who afford participating in private foreign language institutes, spent more time on studying English. Despite the huge amount of time and budget dedicated to learning English most of the Iranian learners have difficulty with this subject area. The problems are more sever in oral proficiency skills of these learners of English as a foreign language.

On the other hand, assessment and evaluation have always been important areas of policy and practice in ELT. They are common concerns in different ELT levels, from mainstream schooling to specialist EAP courses, from kindergarten to adult, and in both traditional EFL and ESL contexts. However, for much of the history of ELT, assessment and evaluation have been seen as the responsibility of specialists, divorced from the business of teaching and learning.

Assessment and evaluation judgments have usually been delivered long after the event, formulated in often mysterious and non-negotiable terms, with a heavy reliance on technical terminology and statistics. "As a consequence, assessment and evaluation have always been taken for granted in ELT, but often misunderstood by practitioners, rarely included as a component in English language teacher training, and never really challenged by key stake-holders." (Davison & Cummins, 2007, p.415).

As the present researcher's experience as a student and as a teacher and her discussion with her colleagues indicated, in Iranian schools, especially in Javanrood, students are assessed solely by instructors; this activity is intended to improve the students' performance. However, students' performance is less than expected. One issue is large class size (30- 40 students in each classroom), which has a negative effect on learning and teaching. In classes with such a large population, instructors cannot always understand their students' needs.

Within this situation, as Taras (2001) argued, teachers are sending out the wrong message to students. They lead them to believe that the main focus of interest is the grade. After teachers' correction of their students' paper, the things they receive is marks, some question symbols and some ticks. Once students submit their work they typically become disengaged with the assessment process. Hence, opportunities for learning are lost as they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes.

Learners are not given the chance to assess their own performance. In this regard Luoma & Tarnanen (2003) have written that:

"SA is intended to help students understand the goals of tasks, reflect on what they have achieved with reference to such goals, and figure out what it will take to finally reach their goals. Despite the importance of SA, learners are rarely put in charge of rating their own performance. (p.440)

This is true in the context of Asian countries, especially Iranian learners of English as a foreign language. That is because the learning context has traditionally been focused on teacher centered instruction and measurement- driven assessments, and the environment is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness among students. Littlewood (1999)

observed in his studies that East Asian students expect the teacher, as the holder of authority and knowledge, to be responsible for the learning assessment.

Thus, one may expect that SA might recently work well in Asian classrooms because, according to Stevenson and Stigler (1992), Asian societies recently tend to attribute educational success to effort rather than ability.

In this regard Hamp-Lyons (2007) described two conflicting cultures of assessment: *a learning culture* and *an exam culture*. While a learning culture focuses on individual learners' progress in learning, an exam culture focuses on learners' mastery of language proficiency in relation to that of groups or norms. Recently, a number of studies reported challenges in implementing assessment reforms in traditionally exam-oriented cultures such as in Hong Kong (e.g. Davison, 2007) and Singapore (Mee, 1998).

Brown, Race & Smith (2005), stated that introducing student peer and SA can seem a daunting and hazardous prospect if you are surrounded by an exam culture. According to Hamp-Lyons (2007), the transition from an exam culture to a learning culture is a complex process, and one needs to pay close attention to teachers' views and voices particularly through professional development activities during the process of establishing value systems for educational assessment in order to make the transition successful. She concludes that planned innovation in assessment is unlikely to be successful without vastly improved attention to teacher assessment preparation.

In these cases, it is important that students play a role to help themselves become better learners. In this way, SA enhances the role and responsibilities of the student; however, the instructor remains the main source of assessment.

Based on what have been mentioned, the problem which this study aims to investigate is that, students are not involved in the assessment process and they have not been provided with the opportunity to do it. As mentioned before the introduction of SA can be problematic in Asian context in which exam culture is dominant.

1.4. Purpose of the study

Based on what have been said and as traditional measures have failed to achieve significant learning outcomes, the present researcher thought that neglecting the students' role in assessments may be one of the main factors behind this low performance. And introducing a new assessment system which focuses on centrality of learners in assessment domain may lead to developments in this domain. Hence, the decision was made to introduce the concept of SA (SA) to the learners' classes and seeking its effect on learners' level of proficiency and their ability in self assessing their oral performance.

The researcher after reviewing the related literature came to the conclusion that, although SA has been prevalent for a number of years in such fields as psychology, sociology, business, and so on, its use in second and foreign language teaching/learning has remained rather rare. And studies investigating the impact of students' SA on their performance in oral performance in English in Iran are rare. To the best knowledge of the researcher there are only two research done in SA era which were done in the context of oral performance skill. Therefore, this study is one of the first studies dealing with the implementation of this technique, and maybe the first one done in oral proficiency domain. So, lack of research investigating the impact of students' SA on their performance in oral presentation in English raises the need to conduct further studies.

In addition, the review reveals several gaps in the literature. There are insufficient studies to enable any conclusions to be drawn *vis-à-vis* improvement in ability over time or with practice. Another area of research as yet inadequately explored is that of gender differences. Of the 48 studies (including those ones implemented in language teaching, management, nursing, economy) reviewed by Boud and Falchikov (1989), surprisingly, only six addressed gender question. And as Rea- Dickins (2002) stated "Relatively little has been written about the actual engagement of teachers and their learners—as evidenced by research studies in the implementation of specific approaches and assessment activities.

Furthermore, the inconsistent findings of research on SA highlight the need for more research. A similar plea was also voiced by some scholars (e.g. Brantmeier, 2006; Oscarson, 1997; Ross, 1998), acknowledging the scarcity of research in the area of SA in foreign or second language context. Therefore, the present research is an attempt to provide empirical evidence concerning the use of SA.

A highly significant feature of this study is that the teachers and learners involved were first trained in SA techniques. Learners were asked to assess their performance using the same criteria used by the teacher. The SA process was conducted as a tool for learners to monitor their own performance through critical feedback from their teachers and rarely from their classmates. It was not an isolated activity but was accompanied with teacher assessment. After their attempt to assess their performance, their given marks were compared with the teacher's. Then they were given feedback. It was not an attempt to illustrate whether they were correct and accurate or not, but rather how well they understood and applied the criteria.

1.5. Significance of study

As the main goal of teachers is to help students in their learning process, they should be put in the center of the assessment. Falchikov and Thomson (2008) in an investigation of the factors which makes the involvement of students in assessment necessary mentioned the following drivers:

1. Empowering learners
2. Encouraging attention and dialogue
3. Enhancement of learning and performance
4. The improvement of affect and understanding of assessment criteria
5. Socializing students into a discipline
6. Developing reflection
7. Creating partnership

It is apparent that student involvement creates opportunities for interaction while increasing objectivity in assessment. If learners are placed in a situation where they can access information on the quality and level of their own performances, then it is possible that they can clarify their own understanding of the assessment criteria and, more importantly, what is required of them. Ross (2006) stated that "the benefits of SA are more likely to accrue when three conditions are met: teacher and learners negotiate SA criteria, teacher-student dialogue focuses on evidence for judgments, and SAs contribute to a grade" (p.2).

As a result, the rationale behind the decision of introducing SA to learners was that, providing assessment systems that are fair, valid, reliable, efficient and effective put on increasing pressure on teachers. Nothing affects learners more than assessment, yet assessments are in the dark as to what goes on in the mind of the assessors and examiners. Brown, Race & Smith (2005) believe that SA is increasingly, being used to involve learners more closely in their learning and its evaluations, and to help to enable learners really understand what is required of them. Traditionally, assessment of students' work has caused teachers more difficulties than any other area, yet growing number of students and severe financial restraints mean that even existing standards are difficult to maintain

Accurate SA is an important but underdeveloped skill in language teaching domain that, in the past, has received little formal attention from educators. Oscarson (1989) believes that there is a need to refine the tools and methods that have been employed and even the need to develop new ones and to emphasize the importance of giving students practice in autonomous learning and self-directed evaluation, at all levels and in a wide variety of language learning settings.

In the literature review a huge number of advantages have been mentioned for the implementation of SA process. It will have benefits for teachers, learners and even institutes. Gardner (2000) summarized these advantages in a figure, like the one below. Further and expanded review of the advantages will be provided in chapter two.

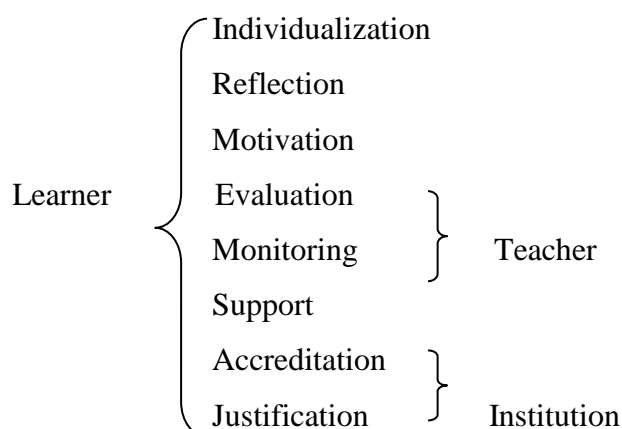


Figure: 1.1. Benefits of implementing SA. Adopted from Gardner (2000:51)

Given the varied and often conflicting responsibilities teachers face daily, it is not surprising that assessment issues may prompt an exasperated, "Why do we assess