Implementing Self-assessment Activities in Japanese University Classes

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Abstract

Encouraging learners to critically reflect upon their language learning is thought to facilitate interlanguage development by prompting learners to notice gaps in L2 knowledge and increase awareness of learning that has, or has not, taken place. Self-assessment activities, where learners evaluate their own performance using rubrics based upon instructional aims, have emerged as a means of promoting such reflection and encouraging the active involvement of learners in the language learning process. This paper examines the use of such activities in Japanese university classes, and discusses some of the pedagogical benefits of using self-assessment both inside and outside the classroom. By facilitating the active participation of learners in the evaluation of their own performance, self-assessment activities are a practical means of increasing learner autonomy, encouraging independent goal setting, and assisting learners in more effectively managing their own language learning.

Introduction

Assessment is an essential part of language instruction, a means of providing feedback to learners, evaluating current L2 proficiency, and guiding future language learning. Traditionally, such assessment has been conducted by instructors or other experts, with students having little understanding of the rubrics and framework underlying grading practices (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Such an approach minimizes the role of the

learner in assessing their own performance, managing their own language learning, and understanding their own evolution as language learners. Given the current emphasis upon promoting learner-centered classrooms and autonomy within SLA, this situation appears inappropriate.

Self-assessment activities have emerged as a response to such traditional approaches to assessment.　Such activities, in which students evaluate their performance with reference to specific rubrics, provide a practical means of promoting the reflection and goal-setting characteristic of effective assessment.　This paper outlines ways in which self-assessment can be incorporated into the classroom, focusing specifically upon Japanese university students, a group which typically is not afforded the opportunity to assess their own performance as language learners.　It outlines current research in the field, the pedagogical benefits of self-assessment and ways in which self-assessment instruments can be used to promote more effective language learning.

Accuracy of Self–Assessment

Self-assessment activities have been studied by various researchers in regards to their accuracy, specifically the extent to which they match the evaluations provided by instructors and standardized test scores (Oscarson, 2014).　For some, issues with respect to accuracy are considered to be a barrier, making the implementation of self-evaluative activities in language classrooms inappropriate.　Research on the topic and findings from studies suggests that issues with accuracy can potentially lead to concerns over reliability and validity (Saito, 2009).　While accuracy is not a central concern for most instructors, who are generally more interested in their effectiveness

as pedagogical tools, in some cases, including those where instructors choose to use self-assessment activities as a complement to their own grading, accuracy can be an important factor. Accordingly, it is worth considering whether learners' assessments complement or contradict the evaluations offered by other forms of assessment.

Various studies have examined the accuracy of self-assessment activities in the classroom with mixed results. Patri (2002) examined the use of self-assessment in a presentation class, which he compared to peer-assessment and instructor assessments. He found relatively strong correlations, perhaps owing to the hours of training and practice participants received in utilizing the assessment rubric. Peirce, Swain and Hart (1999) conversely found weaker correlations. Their comparison of the self-assessments scores of students in a French language program and standardized test scores revealed only slight correlations on the four skills examined. Brown, Dewey, and Cox (2014) examined the use of self-assessments of university students studying Russian before and after undertaking an internship abroad. Moderate correlations were found between the self-assessment scores and speaking test results. In another study of Japanese learners enrolled in small communicative student-centered classes, learners' assessments of their performance using various spoken language skills were strongly correlated with that of the instructor over the course of a semester, but accuracy was modest (Warchulski, 2016). Similarly, in an examination of the use of self-assessment activities in English discussion classes, Singh (2015) found only modest correlations between student- and instructor-assessments of performance. These correlations did not vary significantly over time with increased exposure to self-assessment instruments. Lappin-Fortin and Rye (2014) also found moderate correlations between self- and instructor-

assessments of pronunciation. However, the accuracy of assessments varied depending upon the phonological elements in question, and the type of instruction provided.

Despite the mixed results in the research, all of the studies, including those where accuracy was an issue, suggest that self-assessment activities are pedagogically beneficial in a variety of ways. Further, some important themes emerge from studies examining the accuracy of self-assessment instruments. The amount of training and the complexity of self-assessment tasks can significantly impact the extent to which learner assessments are accurate. Self-assessment instruments which require learners to examine intricate aspects of their knowledge or performance can be overwhelming for learners unaccustomed to their framework. Similarly, where rubrics are complex, unclear, or unfamiliar to learners, accurate assessments are less likely unless learners receive substantial amounts of training clarifying how to appropriately evaluate performance. Affective factors can also potentially impact self-assessment, as learners with more confidence in themselves and their L2 proficiency may view their performance in a manner distinct from those with comparatively negative self-perceptions.

Pedagogical Benefits of Self–Assessment

The status of self-assessment instruments as pedagogically useful tools that can contribute to effective learning remains less debatable than their potential as accurate means of measuring learners' linguistic proficiency. Some of the potential pedagogical benefits of using self-evaluation activities in language classrooms include the promotion of autonomy, an increase in productivity, an awareness of progress, reduction in frustration, higher

motivation levels, and opportunities for individualization and reflection (Saito, 2009; Rivers, 2001; Gardner, 2000; Harris, 1997).

Self-assessment fosters the type of reflection, self-evaluation and goal-setting that is central to effective language learning. By directing learners to evaluate and notice gaps in performance, they align with Schmidt's (1990) argument that effective language learning necessitates awareness and attention. Several studies examining their pedagogical benefits support this position and their use in the language classroom.

Moeller, Theiler, and Wu (2012) examined the implementation of LinguaFolio in American high schools over a four-year period, a self-assessment curriculum in which learners set goals, established action plans, and were encouraged to reflect upon their performance continually. Learners' linguistic proficiency was measured annually using standardized speaking tests targeting reading, writing, and speaking ability. The researchers found that students' goal-setting ability improved over the course of the study and there was a significant positive correlation between the use of a self-assessment curriculum and linguistic proficiency. Lappin-Fortin and Rye (2014), in an examination of the use of self-assessment tasks in a French pronunciation class, similarly found that self-assessment activities contributed to improved pronunciation. They found that self-assessment promoted increased awareness, and stronger targeting of learning goals which contributed to more target-like pronunciation. Saint-Leger (2009) also found self-assessment to benefit learners. In an examination of French speakers in an advanced speaking class, she found that self-assessment encouraged learners to take increased responsibility for their own learning, and contributed to greater awareness of learning goals. She found self-assessment pedagogically beneficial, contributing both to the

cognitive and affective aspects of L2 acquisition.

Promoting greater learner autonomy and involvement can be particularly beneficial to Japanese university students. While attempts at reform remain ongoing, most Japanese high school students continue to receive instruction in large classes that are lecture-based, and focused primarily upon accuracy and receptive knowledge (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Upon entering university, learners are often placed in classes that seek to promote productive language skills, and a more learner-centered environment. This paradigmatic shift, in which performance and output is evaluated rather than receptive knowledge, can be especially challenging for learners unaccustomed to communicative language teaching. Self-assessment activities are one means of aiding this transition, and clarifying for learners the specific aims of university language classes. By raising awareness of lesson aims, and promoting goal-setting and reflection, they encourage active involvement in the learning process.

Implementing Self–Assessment Activities in University Classes

For many instructors teaching university classes, implementing self-assessment activities can present a wide variety of challenges and as such, a number of theoretical and practical factors should be taken into account. For instance, since one of the primary purposes of utilizing self-assessment activities is the promotion of autonomy, university instructors ought to begin by conceptualizing how self-assessment activities can be situated within a broader framework of autonomous learning in a manner that fits their educational context and matches the specific needs of their learners. In implementing self-assessment activities, instructors need to consider

what the balance should be between allowing learners, as opposed to the instructor, to make a variety of important choices in their learning such as in determining learning objectives, choosing the methods of learning, and assessing their performance and progress in a manner that reflects actual grades.

Littlewood (1999) provides a useful framework that is particularly appropriate for use in the Japanese context. A distinction is made between two forms of autonomy -- reactive and proactive. The proactive form of autonomy is generally thought to be more applicable to learners in Western educational settings since there is an expectation that learners be actively engaged in most aspects of the learning process. This type of autonomy often requires a radical restructuring of teacher and student roles and as such, is not necessarily suitable for all Japanese learners. Conversely, Littlewood proposes that instructors teaching in East Asian settings ought to consider promoting reactive autonomy. Unlike proactive autonomy, the reactive form is seen as more gradual and culturally sensitive. Further, this type of autonomy "does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (p. 75). As it pertains to self-assessment activities, utilizing a reactive model implies that instructors should be primarily responsible for choosing course objectives and defining the items to be assessed.

Another important consideration regarding implementation is choosing the type of self-assessments to be administered, which often depends on the purpose for their use. Here, Oscarson (1989) proposes that assessments can generally be divided into two types: 1) performance-oriented, and 2) development-oriented. The main distinction between these is that whereas

performance-oriented self-assessments measure students' performance of language proficiency at one particular point in time, such as on a placement test, development-oriented self-assessments focus on the process of learning in a classroom environment whereby participants' changes and patterns of development are observed over an extended period (Saito, 2009). In the context of university classes, choosing development-oriented self-assessments is clearly more appropriate since many of the pedagogical benefits discussed above tend to be associated with these types of assessments.

Additionally, instructors need to be mindful of some practical considerations. Among these are the questions of when and how to incorporate self-assessments in the language classroom. On the topic, Harris (1997) recommends that for self-assessments to be effective, they need to be practical in terms of time and should be integrated with everyday classroom routines and activities. Put another way, self-assessments shouldn't be overly burdensome to students' overall cognitive load and their length shouldn't detract from other activities. For instance, they can be used as a regular component of the feedback stages during a lesson whereby they complement and provide a form of student-generated feedback.

Another practical consideration that may arise with respect to implementation is the issue of what components should be included in a self-assessment activity. Although this may vary depending on one's teaching context, Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest that self-assessment activities contain the following: the purpose of the assessments, a procedure for conducting and marking them, a marking scale, a range of follow-up choices and actions related to the students' scores, and some benefits to learners. Accordingly, instructors should try to ensure that any use of self-assessment

activities in the language classroom meets these requirements. In addition, teachers need to facilitate their students by providing any necessary training and support that may be required. This is particularly important in Japan since when students enter their university studies, they are unlikely to have much experience evaluating their language abilities.

Potential Issues

One issue that can arise regarding the use of self-assessment instruments is the manner in which they interact with the feedback and assessment provided by instructors. Learners, doubtlessly, depend on the instructor for expertise and typically view their role in assessing performance as central. Singh (2014) examined learner responses to self-assessment, and the balance between instructor feedback and learner-centered feedback preferred by Japanese university students in a freshmen speaking class. While there was some variation in responses, by and large, most learners preferred a mix of feedback, with a preference toward instructor feedback. This indicates that while learners see some benefit in self-assessment, they still expect instructors to play a strong role in assessing performance and providing feedback. In cases where instructor evaluations and self-assessments contradict one another, some potential for conflict exists, and learners might struggle to reconcile assessments that differ. It falls on the instructor to highlight that this is an inevitable part of self-assessment. Differences in assessment can reflect the generalized feedback typically provided by instructors versus the personalized feedback offered by self-assessment instruments, the instructional aims of teachers, which might not always align with those of the student, or simply issues

related to training, the complexity of instruments, or human error. Such conflicts, rather than being a source of contention, can also provide an opportunity for dialogue between learners and instructors.

　　Another issue is whether self-assessment should constitute a part of learners' grades. There are both advantages and disadvantages, and decisions will typically reflect the age, motivation, and maturity of learners, as well as the purpose and complexity of self-assessment instruments (Oscarson, 2014). Using self-assessment scores as a component of learners' grades has the advantage of signaling to students that self-assessment is an important aspect of a course, an activity to which students ought to dedicate serious attention. It also demonstrates to learners that their assessment scores are meaningful, worthy of inclusion as a part of learners' overall course grades. However, one issue with using self-assessment in such a manner is the potential that this might prompt learners to be less honest when rating their performance. As inflating self-assessment scores would improve learners' course grades, providing incentives for students to generously evaluate their performance diminishes the pedagogical benefits of self-assessment activities. One solution could be to use self-assessment scores as only a small part of learners' overall grades, which could reduce the benefits of inflating scores. Another possibility is to assess learners' completion of self-assessment activities, rather than to incorporate the scores themselves in overall assessment. While the particular teaching context in question will determine what the most appropriate approach might be, using self-assessment activities as a component of students' overall grade has various benefits and should be given serious consideration by instructors.

　　One common conflict in the design of self-assessment instruments is

the tension between complexity and ease of use. While self-assessment instruments with large numbers of items and detailed rubrics can prompt learners to analyze their performance in greater depth, in most cases, this might require an investment of time and training that would take away from other pedagogical needs. Having language learners utilize rubrics similar to those employed by instructors, though ideal, would be overly burdensome for most language learners, who lack the knowledge, expertise, and training to effectively make use of such instruments (Singh, 2015). Conversely, utilizing simplistic self-assessment instruments, while reducing the amount of classroom time dedicated to such activities, will foster only superficial levels of self-evaluation. In most cases, erring on the side of simplicity is advisable, as self-assessment is best viewed by learners as an enjoyable chance to reflect upon one's performance, rather than to master a form of analysis. However, with motivated, capable learners, utilizing complex instruments can assist in helping them in understanding and mapping their progress as language learners in greater depth and detail.

Conclusion

Self-assessment can initially appear novel to many learners, who are unaccustomed to taking on such responsibility for their own learning and evaluation. Particularly for Japanese learners, notions of autonomy contrast with the typical experiences in secondary school language classes, where a more passive role for learners is expected. As well, instructors might find the concept of encouraging learners to evaluate and reflect upon their performance unusual, as feedback is generally within the purview of the instructor. The promotion of learner autonomy inevitably results

in some adjustments to the roles typically occupied by instructors and learners, a more active role in the case of learners, a more facilitative one for instructors. Learners generally will find this new role simultaneously intriguing and challenging, particularly when self-assessment activities are first introduced. It is imperative, therefore, that instructors introduce self-assessment in a gradual, supportive manner, and provide learners with feedback and advice regarding the use of self-assessment instruments. Doing so will ensure that students become more confident in their ability to assess their own performance, thereby improving their ability to more effectively manage their own language learning.

Nevertheless, self-assessment activities should not be viewed as a means of supplanting the role of the instructor in the classroom. Learners still expect instructors to provide guidance, feedback, and expert assessments of performance based upon their knowledge and experience as language instructors. Rather self-assessment should be viewed as a complement to the role played by instructors, a means of increasing the responsibility taken by learners over their own language learning, and a practical means of promoting learner autonomy in the second language classroom.

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