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Paper: Self Assessment and Autonomous Learning

Abstract:

Literature informs that being autonomous in one's learning is significant to learning success (van Krayenoord and Paris 1997; Little 2005). In a learner autonomy environment, learners are facilitated towards setting their own goals for learning, thinking through the strategies or tactics to be used for learning, taking actions to achieve the goals set earlier, monitoring and evaluating the results of their work. All these will get learners more engaged in learning and will fortify the transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner. Self assessment and plays a particular important role in developing learner autonomy. Self assessment is characteristic of the active, responsible learner, one who cultivates a sense of his or her progress, achievement, and perhaps level of competence (Jones, 1995). It encourages self monitoring, evaluation of learning goals as set, and making new learning plans.

This paper reports on an investigation that explored the relationship between self-assessment and Learner Autonomy. To achieve a deeper understanding of the focus of investigation, a curriculum embedded with four self assessment tasks was designed and used for teaching in a junior secondary English language class in a local secondary school in Hong Kong. Data analysis of the information collected from student self-assessment, teacher and student reflections, teacher and student interviews and a Learner Autonomy Self Efficacy Questionnaire consolidated the relationship between self assessment and learner autonomy.

Self Assessment and Autonomous Learning

Dr Rita Berry

Introduction

The modern classroom is a constantly evolving environment, responding to the ever changing needs and demands of the society and students for education. As global issues become increasingly complex, the demand for a more effective educational system, one which can empower students to become forward thinkers, has become overwhelmingly apparent. However, the method with which this can be achieved is still heavily disputed.

Over the last decade, self-assessment has received an increasing amount of attention in the academic field, being recognized as an effective way to raise pupil awareness of their own performance and study methods. Advocated by a number of academics (Bahous, 2008; Berry, 2008a; Brew, 2009; Cassidy, 2007; Chen, 2008; Chirkov, 2009; Railton & Watson, 2005; Francis, 2008; Kato, 2009; Lebler, 2007; Niemiec, 2009; Ponton, 2005; Spratt, 2002), the practice allows for the student to gain a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to better decide upon corrective strategies (Lebler, 2007). It is agreed by both academics and student-participants in these exercises that self-assessment activities are very useful in promoting lifelong learning (Bahous, 2008; Brew, 2009; Cassidy, 2007; Chen, 2008; Chirkov, 2009). Cassidy notes that self-assessment propagates student centered learning, providing students with the opportunity to develop general learning skills, (Cassidy, 2007), while Bahous adds that self-assessment, allows for students to ‘to reflect, and to develop their abilities in assessing their own work and understanding... thus, learners end up eventually taking responsibility for their own learning’ (Bahous, 2008). However, self-assessment is not often used in the classroom. Surveys have shown that while some teachers have started using self-assessment exercises in class, a large number has not (Brew, 2009; Cassidy, 2007). The use and understanding of the nature of self-assessment is sometimes misunderstood. A number of students perceive it as a way for tutors to pass on the responsibility of assessment and teaching – which they see as being the teacher’s prerogative – to the student (Brew, 2009). Students should see self-assessment as a way to not only improve their own meta-cognitive thinking (Cassidy, 2007), but to take on greater responsibility of their own learning.

The contributions of self-assessment in learner autonomy

Learner Autonomy requires students to become active learners, navigating the course for their own learning process through setting their own goals and measuring their progress towards them. Balciknali, among others, believes that the achievement of Learner Autonomy, even if not in its ideal form, can help students engage in deep learning, while also developing skills that can be used in later life. Academics tend to break down Learner Autonomy into two parts – psychological and capability (Berry, 2006). Capability entails the ability of a student to manage their own learning, knowing how to learn. Students who are capability ready adopt good learning strategies, know where to look for resources and how to utilize them. The psychological aspect covers the mentality of the learner, mainly revolving around their motivation and readiness to learn. According to Niemiec, students who exhibit more intrinsic forms of motivation tend to be more autonomous learners (Niemiec, 2009).

From these concepts alone, it is evident that Learner Autonomy is determined by a large number of attributes and factors. Berry (2006) breaks down Learner Autonomy into 11 attributes, covering 4 overall categories – planning one's own learning (Attributes 1-2), making decisions on learning (Attributes 3-5), utilization of resources (Attributes 6-7), and monitoring and assessment of one's own progress (Attributes 8-11), in essence forming a continuous learning cycle. Though there is no one way to achieve Learner Autonomy, it is fair to argue that the presence of a majority of these characteristics in a learner would suggest an autonomous learner. The 11 attributes are listed below:

1. Plan own learning
2. Set learning goals
3. Make choices
4. Work out own ways
5. Manage actions
6. Utilize physical resources
7. Utilize human resources
8. Monitor own learning
9. Evaluate own learning
10. Self assess
11. Reflect and make plans

(Berry 2008b, p.120-123)

While self-assessment is technically only considered to be 1 of the 11 attributes, the concept of self-assessment, whereby the student assesses their own learning, progress and learning practices is, in fact, covered by a number of the attributes above, namely 8 through 11: Monitor Own Learning, Evaluate Own Learning, Self-Assess, and Reflect and Make Plans. In other words, these attributes are essentially synonymous with the notion of self-assessment, being parts of the self-assessment process rather than distinctly independent entities. The remaining 7 attributes are, however, also intrinsically linked to self assessment. For example, in a curriculum embedded with Learner Autonomy concepts, students are encouraged to plan their learning and establish their own goals, deliberating on what is needed of them, and to decide on what they want to achieve through the learning process. Students then make choices in regards to learning practices and methods to achieve their learning goals, working out their own strategies and all the while managing their own actions. As the students implement these choices and actions, they will need to utilize physical and human resources available to them, for example, reference books and peer discussions, respectively. The students will then need to monitor their own learning process, specifically the actions that they had decided upon, and how they affect their own learning. Through this process they will need to determine what areas need improving and to check their work against certain standards. This is followed by self-assessment and reflection by the student as they assess their own strengths and weaknesses, learning more about themselves as learners and as individuals in the process. This new-found realization and understanding of oneself allows the student to make plans and re-determine their goals and to plan how to continue their own learning, completing the cycle.

Self-assessment can certainly be integrated into every step in the cycle. One example is that students can from time to time check with themselves whether their learning goals have been well set and well matched with the strategies they used for their learning. Another example can be, while making decisions on or utilizing strategies for learning, students can think back and think forward about their choice of strategies and the way they were used. Accordingly, they could make some educated changes of the plans, alter their choice and use of learning strategies in regard to the needs of becoming more effective in their learning. An ideal situation is that students have internalized self-assessment practices and self-assessment has become automatic in students.

Balcikanli (2008) shares Berry's views by pointing out that self-assessment is crucial to Learner Autonomy. Balciknali's argument revolves around the concept of self-assessment as a dynamic measuring and reflection tool, indicating to the learner their achievements and areas that need improvement. Without this understanding the learner simply cannot move on in their learning process if they are to be autonomous learners, as they would not have a sense of direction and would be unable to come up with remedial strategies, being unsure of what issues need addressing. However, this is not to say that self-assessment is separate from Learner Autonomy or the 10 other attributes. Rather, self-assessment plays a fundamental role in facilitating the smooth running of the other attributes.

Berry and Balciknali's sentiments are echoed in Dickinson's profile of an autonomous language learner, stressing that they understand what is being taught, are able to formulate their own learning objectives, are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies, are able to monitor their use of strategies and are able to self-assess their own learning (Balcikanli, 2008). Balciknali reasons that Dickinson's profile seems to be the most accurate portrayal as it addresses Kupfer's definition of an autonomous person as 'the one who chooses for himself what to think and what to do' (Balcikanli, 2008). In the same piece, Balcikanli also quoted Little's definition of Learner Autonomy "Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little, 1991: 4)" (Balcikanli, 2008). Using these definitions as a basis, self-assessment is quite evidently an integral part of Learner Autonomy, perhaps more so than literature had previously suggested.

A number of other theories concerning Learner Autonomy cited in recent literature have also touched upon the use of self-assessment. For example, Ponton mentioned that the Inventory of Learner Persistence developed by Derrick (2001), which assesses the learner's goal directedness, self-regulation and volition (Ponton, 2005), all of which, in turn, can be achieved through the practice of self-assessment, is one way to determine Learner Autonomy. He also states that Carr's Inventory of Resourcefulness (Carr, 1999) measures four behavioral intentions that exhibit autonomous learning, and are brought about with proper self-assessment practices. As Railton & Watson have noted, as the development of motivation fundamental part of Learner Autonomy – though some would argue that motivation leads to autonomy (Spratt, 2002), and motivation itself can be manifested through self-assessment practices, namely monitoring self-progress (Railton & Watson 2005), one can argue that current literature already outlines the connection between self-assessment and Learner Autonomy. Meanwhile, Francis framed empowerment as 'the ability for individuals to

make personal decisions relating to how they are assessed'; and at the student community level, as 'the ability of the student community to democratically make decisions relating to how it will be assessed' (Francis, 2008).

In his work on pursuing Learner Autonomy in music education, Lebler coined the term 'student-as-master' (Lebler, 2007), where students would take on stewardship of their own learning, explaining that such would require a departure from the pedagogical method of instruction. He argued for a more student-centered approach to the classroom dynamic, such as through student self-assessing reflections, as did Nicol and Macdonald (Nicol, 2009; Macdonald, 2002). Bahous even suggests that that self-assessment can even lead to learners taking greater responsibility for one's own learning. Much like Bahous, Hung's study on portfolios promotes self-assessment as an effective strategy for implementing Learner Autonomy, as it encourages students to assess their own progress and to focus on their learning (Hung, 2009). Chirkov notes that the students in his study demonstrated a connection between self-assessment and autonomous learning: 'they may not have taken a proactive role in their learning, but their growth in self- assessment suggested that the assessment practice can be a successful practice of reactive autonomy' (Chirkov, 2009). Brajcich, as quoted by Balcikanli, listed student diaries among his suggestions to implement Learner Autonomy in the classroom, as it allows students to become more aware of their learning preferences and their progress (Balcikanli, 2008). Kato adds that 'Monitoring and self-assessment of the student's progress have become essential elements in learning languages in order to raise the level of awareness and ultimately promote Learner Autonomy' (Kato 2009). With respect to self-assessment, Clark (1991) argues that this requires students to possess skills that are comparable to those required for successful independent study.

It is evident that the relationship between self-assessment and Learner Autonomy is more than just a link, but, rather, symbiotic in nature and its importance to the achievement of Learner Autonomy understated. What is missing, then, is a clear explanation of the direct correlation between self-assessment and Learner Autonomy. This paper aims to fill that void, providing an understanding of the dynamics and relationship between the two, and how they are not only related, but are fundamentally connected to one another.

The Study

The aim of the study was to achieve a deeper understanding of the relationship between self-assessment and Learner Autonomy, and to bring about an understanding as to whether self-assessment is merely an attribute, among many, of Learner Autonomy, or if it is of greater significance. Answering these will not only give us a clearer picture of the dynamic between Learner Autonomy and the implementation of self-assessment, but will allow us to better frame and structure assessment methods and classroom practices in order to bring about Learner Autonomy, preparing students to take helm of their own learning process, and enable them to become lifelong learners.

Participants

The study was based on the experience of a student-teacher enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program at the Hong Kong institute of Education and the students in their respective class in her teaching practicum at a local school. The student-teacher had her teaching practicum at a prestigious school where teaching and learning was very teacher-centred. Students were very used to following what their teachers would want them to do. There was not much room on the part of the learners for thinking back and thinking forward of their own learning, let alone making decisions on their own learning. Students at the school were generally very exam-oriented. They listened intently to teachers' instructions and tried their best to match the requirements of the assignments set for them as this would help them get good grades/marks. The school's policy on assessment was such that it was used as a tool for making judgments of performance and reinforcement of learning. In the school policies, a fairly wide range of assessment strategies were mentioned including class work, homework assignments, oral presentations, portfolio and projects, quizzes, formal tests and examinations. However, the school had a deep-rooted exam culture and these assessment strategies were mainly used for grading purposes. Self-assessment had never been a practice at the school.

As part of their teaching practicum this study asked the student-teacher to try out a learning and assessment plan, incorporating elements of Learner Autonomy and self-assessment into their curriculum by drawing upon the 11 attributes of Learner Autonomy as defined by Berry (Berry, 2008b), and infusing classroom activities with opportunities for students to reflect upon and take charge of their own learning. The student-teacher taught 18 lessons and closely monitored the performance and progress of her students. The student-teacher and the course instructor met thrice throughout the practicum period. These meetings served not only as chances for observation for

the course instructor, but also as a workshop to help brainstorm and consolidate Learner Autonomy and self-assessment into the student-teachers' lesson plans.

Research Methodologies

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approach was used for the investigation. Various forms of qualitative data were collected for the study, namely; self-assessment tasks, teacher reflections and student interviews. Using NVivo 7, student reflections collected from the four self-assessment tasks were analyzed, looking for a correlation between Learner Autonomy and self-assessment. Student-teacher reflection pieces were checked for the implementation of Learner Autonomy and self-assessment practices, and the results, as well as obstacles encountered, highlighted. Student attitudes, as interpreted by the researcher through interviews, towards these practices were also carefully noted.

In addition, three students in her class were randomly selected to interview periodically throughout the course of the teaching practicum to gauge their reaction to the implementation of Learner Autonomy and self-assessment in their lessons, and to provide feedback for the student where necessary. As such, the student-teacher and her respective class acted as a case study in this report in her implementation of Learner Autonomy and self-assessment.

A questionnaire (LASEQ) was designed to investigate students' perception of their learning. The questionnaire was designed based upon the eleven learner autonomy attributes identified from the literature (Berry 2008). LASEQ was administered at the end of the teaching practicum. There were in total 22 items, grouped into 2 sets of 11 statements each with one set looking at psychological readiness and the other at capability readiness. The 11 statements were written specifically to reflect the characteristics of the 11 LA attributes. The students were asked to respond to the statements on a 5-point Likert scale, which indicated Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree respectively. To ensure understanding, the questionnaire was in both English and Chinese. The English was translated into Chinese by two different people. The researcher made a final edit of the translation before piloting. The questionnaire was piloted twice with the first pilot focusing on text level and the second one focusing on both text level and administrative level. The first pilot study was a one-to-one interview, during which the interviewee was encouraged to raise questions to the items she found unclear. A few questions were raised, leading to a minor revision of some of the wordings of two statements. In the

second pilot study, a class of junior secondary school students ($n = 40$) was asked to complete the questionnaire. Only one student asked about the meaning of a word which was subsequently explained. The administrative procedure went very smoothly and the students completed the questionnaire in 12 minutes.

Findings and discussions

1. Self-assessment

Four self-assessment tasks were designed and integrated into the teaching of the eighteen lesson unit, including needs analysis, concept mapping, checklist, and final reflection.

Needs analysis: The students were instructed to choose and rank the ‘6 most important’ things to learn, out of a given list of 12 options, ranging from ‘new vocabulary about charity’ to ‘skills for extracting useful information from articles and resources’. While the students all managed to do so, there was little else to draw upon from the worksheet with regards to student attitudes, the development of good learning practices, and their understanding of which areas needed improvement, purely due to the approach taken by the student-teacher.

The ‘things to learn’ worksheet was followed by a research schedule that the students were to fill out by themselves, ordering what areas they should focus on first in constructing and designing their final project. While there were a few cases where students simply did not complete the schedule, most students finished the assignment, showing a good coherent approach to their project. One student wrote in her research schedule to choose a charity organization, study its type, duty and message, followed by brainstorming ways to help the organization, and to retrieve resources from the organizations’ published materials and website. Though quite arbitrary, the schedule nevertheless demonstrates the student’s ability to plan out their own learning, given the opportunity to do so.

Concept mapping: Student concept maps were generally well done in this class. Student generally exhibited the ability and effort to explore the topic assigned to them, evident in the number of nodes in their concept maps. Based around the theme of ‘charity’, students came up with topics such as ‘schools’, ‘fund-raising activities’, ‘government’ and ‘local organizations’. Though the student-teacher commented on a few students’ papers that a few more ideas could be included, she handed out mostly

full marks all the same, as the students tended to give an average of 12 or more nodes in their maps. After discussing with her partner, one student in particular improved her concept map, adding another 7 nodes. Despite having already received full marks for the first assignment, this improvement demonstrates the internalization of knowledge and development of good study practices. More importantly, it suggests that the student reflected upon what areas she needed improvement on and was able to do so.

Checklist: From the data collected, it is evident that the self-reflection checklist helped students think about and reflect on their learning process. Learner autonomy attributes were displayed when they were completing the checklist. Two students expressed that he/she could set learning goals to improve her participation. A number of students also suggested ways to manage their action in a way so that their participation could be enhanced, e.g. to speak more English during lesson, avoid talking in Cantonese, pay attention to teachers and prepare for the lessons. Abundant examples of making use of the physical resources around them were also raised, such as reading more English books and newspapers, doing more exercises and watching English TV programs. Besides, they also thought of seeking help from the human resources around them like teachers and classmates. One of the students reflected that sometimes he did not have enough patience to finish the homework. He planned to work on his patience while doing homework, an example of reflecting on one's progress and making plans to improve.

Final reflection: The final lesson required students to do reflections on the three tasks. In this lesson, students had to provide feedback to peers, and take on advice from the teacher and peers for further improvement. The teacher first gave comments on students' presentations in lesson sixteen and seventeen and their peers were invited to critique the presentations as well. Next, students had to complete a self-evaluation sheet, discussing their own roles, after reading the feedback from their classmates. Following the evaluation sheet, students were to look at their learning logs from their previous lessons and write their own reflections for the three tasks in the learner logs. The reflection sheet required students to fill in their feelings towards the learning activities, what they had learned, the difficulties they faced and to suggest some ways to improve themselves. Learner autonomy attributes could be found in the reflection sheet when students responded to how they solved problems they encountered and how they could improve themselves. Managing action was frequently mentioned in the form of using more English, working harder, revising class materials and paying more attention during lessons. For utilizing resources, students expressed that they

would read more books and newspapers, check up the dictionary for words they did not know and do more English practice exercises to improve their English. They would also seek external help from parents, teachers and classmates.

2. Learner Autonomy Self Efficacy Questionnaire (LASEQ)

Validation of the questionnaire

Two hundred secondary students studying in five junior secondary schools of high medium and low academic performance were asked to complete the questionnaire. Statistical analysis was performed using Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS). Because of involving two aspects in the questionnaire, item analysis was carried by obtaining the correlation coefficients between the items and its corresponding aspect scores. Result showed that each item gave satisfied results that the correlation coefficients of the ability readiness aspects ranged from 0.329 to 0.659 and that of the psychology readiness ranged from 0.361 to 0.722, where all coefficients were with significance level less than 0.05. From the result, no item needed to be removed. Given the validity that all the statements in the questionnaire were relevant, the LASEQ was then distributed.

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was computed to check the internal consistency of the questionnaire that is, to indicate the level at which items making up the scale were internally consistent. From the result of reliability test, the value of Cronbach's alpha (0.843) showed that the questionnaire was used in a high performance and the "alpha's if item deleted" also provided the evidence that all the items should be remained in the questionnaire for further uses, though two of the items were slightly higher than the Cronbach's alpha with values 0.846 and 0.854. From the rule of thumb, the questionnaire showed high reliability.

Student perceptions of their learning

Statistical analysis revealed that at the end of the teaching practicum, students felt that they quite ready psychologically for autonomous learning (mean = 3.6781, SD = 0.975). They thought that they were quite capable of stewarding their own learning (mean = 3.6768, SD = 0.975). When viewing both together, students felt that they were fairly autonomous towards their learning (mean = 3.6779, SD = 0.924).

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Score of Learner Autonomy (LA)	27	3.6779	0.924
Score of Psychological Readiness (PR)	27	3.6781	0.975
Score of Capability Readiness (CR)	27	3.6768	0.872

Table 1. Student perception of their LA, PR & CR states

3. Teacher reflections

The student-teacher's experience in implementing Learner Autonomy and self-assessment practices into her classes was a revealing one. In her first of four reflection pieces, she commented that the students had trouble initially with the self-reflection and assessment exercises, as they made general, vague comments on possible improvements to be made, possibly because her students were 'afraid of making a confession' as to problems they faced in their learning processes. Some students also struggled to stay motivated and did not complete their assignments, and the student-teacher also noted that that it was difficult to monitor whether the students had faithfully carried out their work according to their research schedules, meaning it was difficult to measure their ability to plan and follow their own learning. What was evident to her, however, was that some students did succeed in producing outstanding pieces of work:

'Most students can complete the proposal on time the next day and it shows to me that 'make plans and reflect' somehow really works here as student can finish the work within one night due to the fact that the preparation in class is good enough and they have made their own plan to write in advance.'

4. Student interviews

The student interviewees seemed to demonstrate a noticeable degree of Learner Autonomy in the unit learning. During her first interview, a student deemed as 'low-achieving' by the student-teacher told of some issues she had encountered in her learning process so far, namely being confused over the definitions of course-specific vocabulary. To deal with this issue, she had been consulting the dictionary and wrote down new words she learnt for reference. When the student-teacher inquired as to the student's plan of action in regards to her new leaflet project, the student replied that

she had already begun planning out and going to the library to look for relevant material, demonstrating some sense of responsibility to her own learning, as well as a good grasp of what physical resources were available to her. In a later interview, the same student again reflected upon the usefulness of planning her own learning before starting a project, exhibiting once again another element of Learner Autonomy, thereby also demonstrating an understanding of what learning methods were best suited for her, mentioning that learning by memorization might not be the only method to learn.

The student-teacher also interviewed another two ‘high-achievers’ in the same class. The two students showed similar traits, having planned their own learning strategies, based on what they understood of their own learning styles. Students revealed that they had established good learning strategies through use of ‘mind maps’ and planning research before going to a library. In addition, they seemed to know what areas they needed improvement upon – namely speaking English, showing both motivation and an understanding of their own abilities – through an ingrained practice of self-assessment. In a later interview, the students told the student-teacher that they believed there to have been improvement in their oral English, through their efforts at practicing it with their classmates and watching English television. However, they did admit that there were areas to be improved upon yet, such as developing greater interest in English reading materials.

Conclusion

It is evident that self-assessment plays a vital role in autonomous learning. In order to plan one’s own learning and to set learning goals, one must first understand (assess) themselves. Without an understanding of what one’s current status is – such as existing weaknesses, strengths, it would be counter-productive to establish learning goals and objectives, as they would not address issues that need to be dealt with. Similarly, when making decisions as to what learning strategies to adopt and implement, the student will need to have a clear and comprehensive grasp of what practices work better for them, and whether certain approaches would help them develop necessary or desired skills. Data analysis of the information collected from the self assessment tasks, teacher reflections, student interviews and LASEQ consolidated the relationship between self assessment and learner autonomy. However, this study did show that when self-assessment was first introduced to the students involved in the study, quite some of them did not seem to manage it very well. Being able to self-assess is not innate and has to be empowered. To do this, teachers can

create opportunities for students to self-assess. They can design self-assessment tasks and integrate them into teaching and learning. However, self-assessment can promote autonomous learning only if the tasks are carefully designed and delivered in the classroom. This study was conducted with in one local school collecting data from the students from one class. Such a selection of study participants, while by no means a fair representation of the greater Hong Kong student population, nevertheless provides some insight as to the possible ramifications and effects of the implementation of Learner Autonomy and self-assessment in the classroom, and suggests any connections between the two.

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