STUDENTS’ REFLECTIONS ON WRITING IN ESP

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Active participation of students in the self-evaluation of their learning and the development of reflective thinking are the key features of successful learning. This research is aimed at investigating influence of students’ self-assessment on writing in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The study employed a survey on the usefulness of different written tasks and students’ reflections on their benefits to language mastery. The assignments included various contributions to portfolios such as essays, summaries of professional texts, outlines of oral presentations, creative computer tasks as well as students’ written self-assessment notes, i.e. their reflections on various classroom activities. The research involved the students who study Social Sciences at Mykolas Romeris University. The results demonstrated that self-assessment was beneficial to students’ linguistic development. The reflections reveal the attitudes to various assignments and judgments of their usefulness in learning. Reflective practice might help teachers develop ways of dealing with specific difficulties and improve the quality of teaching. Training learners to reflect on learning outcomes is beneficial from the perspective of lifelong learning.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, self-assessment, written assignments, reflections.

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Introduction

Self-assessment has recently become part of learning and teaching foreign languages. Methods of assessment are based on learners’ evaluation of their own learning and linguistic development. The importance and relevance of self-assessment is demonstrated by a multitude of publications in this area. Success in learning often depends on students’ interest and subsequent motivation to study. However, the perceptions of the usefulness of various class activities have not been sufficiently explored. There seems to be a discrepancy between teachers’ and learners’ views on benefits of the same activity. Quite often unpopular activities among teachers like grammar exercises or translation from L2 into L1 are perceived by learners as beneficial to their learning.

The aims of this research are to: 1) study students’ attitudes to the usefulness of various writing activities, 2) introduce self-evaluation and self-assessment of learning, and 3) analyze students’ reflections on success or failure in their learning.

The research methods used in this study are a survey on the usefulness of writing activity and students’ written reflections on learning outcomes. The activities in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class included computer tasks, creative written assignments, summary and essay writing. Traditional testing of learner performance in class activities was replaced by self-assessment.
Literature review

Assessment has been widely used in evaluating the effectiveness of education at tertiary level (Douglas 2000). It refers to the purposeful, selective collection of a learner’s work and reflective self-assessment which documents progress and achievements over time. The key features of assessment are students’ active participation in the evaluation of their own learning and the development of reflective thinking.

Portfolios have been known as a means of assessment for evaluating the effectiveness of learning since the late 1980s. The portfolio, as an element of authentic assessment, has captured the interest of many instructors who want a more comprehensive way to assess their students’ knowledge and skills, to have students who actively participate in the evaluation process, and simultaneously to develop students’ skills of reflective thinking.

The five key characteristics of the portfolio are: an alternative to the traditional testing, comprehensive ways to assess students’ knowledge and skills, authenticity of assessment, students’ active participation in the evaluation process, simultaneous development of students’ reflective thinking. For some teachers, the portfolio is a part of an assessment program, and it can either include a record of students’ achievements or simply document their best work.

For others, the portfolio documents the students’ learning process, and can be used as a means of promoting learners’ reflection.

The European Language Portfolio (Language passport + Language biography + Dossier) was developed and piloted by the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe. It is a well known document in which learners can record their language learning and cultural experiences. The portfolio has pedagogic and reporting functions. Portfolios provide teachers with a wealth of information upon which to base instructional decisions and to evaluate students’ progress. Portfolios can serve as a means of motivating students and promoting their self-evaluation and self-understanding.

The reflections or commentaries on the entries which are typically presented in portfolios are central to portfolios. Through reflections students can develop metacognitive awareness of texts and situations, can improve their strategies dealing with various tasks as well as may judge their own work and compare performance in different assignments.

According to Little (2005), there are three reasons for engaging learners in self-assessment and taking account of the results: firstly, a learner-centeredness; secondly, self-assessment, and thirdly, a tool for lifelong language learning. The most important feature of the ELP is that it supports reflective learning in which self-assessment and goal setting play a central role.

Generally speaking, portfolios rely on students’ natural tendency to save work and become an effective way of getting students to take a second look and think about how they could improve future work. Portfolios can provide structure for involving students in developing and understanding criteria for good efforts and in applying the criteria to their own work (McCabe 2004).

The key drawback of portfolios is that they place additional demands on teachers and students. Teachers need additional time for planning, developing strategies and materials, meeting with individual students and small groups, and reviewing and commenting on student work. Portfolios have been characterized by some teachers as a worthwhile burden with tangible results in instruction and student motivation.

Portfolio assessment is closely linked to instruction because they can reveal weaknesses in instructional processes. Portfolios offer the teacher an in-depth knowledge of the student as a learner and allow the teacher to individualize instruction for the student. However, without reflections, the portfolio remains a folder of the accumulated papers (Coombe, Barlow 2004).

The most common areas of student reflections noted by Nunes (2004) are: syllabus (7%), instruction (36%), learning (43%), and assessment (14%). The students’ experiences using the portfolio framework were investigated by
examining learners’ written reflections (Beckett, Slater 2005). It was found that only one fifth of the 73 participants enjoyed project work; one quarter had mixed feelings, and 57% perceived it negatively. Moreover, the high drop-out rate from the course existed because some students found the course too difficult or believed English classes should be limited to the study of language and resented being asked to accomplish non-linguistic tasks.

It has been claimed that the challenges of portfolio assessment to language learners include lower comparability and reliability and difficulty ensuring standardized testing conditions. They also pose a scoring problem because this criterion requires staff training and is more time-consuming than scoring a single norm-referenced test (Gomer 2001).

According to Nunan (1988), there is a considerable extent of the mismatch between teachers and learners perceptions of the usefulness of different activities. Students rated grammar exercises, pronunciation and error correction more highly than their teachers did, who were more likely to feel comfortable with pair/group work and communication tasks. Interestingly, a study by Spratt (1999) was conducted to compare learners’ preferred activities with teachers’ perceptions of what those preferences were, and only a roughly 50% of correlation was found. Similarly, another researcher (McDonough 2002), reported learners’ dislikes such as listening to tapes and course book dialogues, and preferred grammar exercises, reading aloud, translation as being useful to learning.

Summing up the references, it is important for ESP practitioners to clarify what are students’ attitudes to various assignments, to analyze feedback constantly and to adjust teaching methods to learners’ changing needs.

**Student respondents and research methods (a survey and written reflections)**

The respondents in this research were the students specializing in Social Sciences at Mykolas Romeris University and studying English for Specific Purposes. There were 60 participants aged 19 to 22 in this project. They were predominantly females at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The amount of time spent in L2 environment was 4 hours a week for 3 semesters, which amounts to about 190 hours of English instruction. The data obtained from researched groups was compared to the findings for the control group of 20 students.

In this research we administered a brief survey, which was designed according to the scientific standards (Dornyei 2003) in order to get insights into students’ attitudes to the usefulness of various assignments in English for Specific Purposes classes. The written self-reflections on the performance and achievements in various activities were analyzed. A few excerpts from students’ reflections are reproduced below.

**Results of the survey on the usefulness of class activities**

In accordance with the scientific requirements to the surveys in Social Sciences (Dornyei 2003), all statements were rated on the scale of five possible answers. The students rated each statement by circling or writing the appropriate number: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. The learners’ responses are summarized in Table 1. For the sake of clarity, positive answers (strongly agree and agree) and negative answers (strongly disagree and disagree) are added up.

The first row in Table 1 shows respondents’ perceptions of the utility of learning vocabulary definitions for linguistic development. 73% of the students feel that vocabulary definitions are useful to learning. There were very few negative responses (8%). About the fifth of the respondents (19%) are not sure about the usefulness of this activity in language classes.

The second row in Table 1 shows respondents’ attitudes to writing summaries. 56% of students found writing activities beneficial while 15% disagree, and 29% are not sure.
Generally speaking, students do not enjoy writing formal texts, mainly because they find this activity time-consuming and frustrating due to difficulties in expressing ideas formally, accurately, briefly and clearly.

The attitudes to creative essays are shown in the third row of Table 1. As many as 62% of students enjoy doing creative assignments and assess them as beneficial to linguistic development, 12% of learners are negative about this type of tasks, and 26% are not sure.

The last row in Table 1 shows the students' attitudes to formal testing. Surprisingly, as many as 79% of the students are positive about formal testing while the rest are not sure, with none of the learners being negative about it. Moreover, students expressed their multiple requests for being tested as they claim that tests encourage them to learn harder.

Discussion of statistical processing data

The data in Table 1 were statistically processed. The details of computations are omitted for the sake of brevity. The comparison of the Means shows that the respondents in the studied sample had more favourable views on the utility of writing activities than the respondents in the control group: the Mean values were greater for all activities. The values of Standard Deviations (SDs), which show the scattering of the data, are smaller except for the activity of summary writing. A t-test analysis between means for each activity yielded t-values which were compared with the tabled t-values. It has been found that significance levels differ for various activities. For vocabulary definitions and vocabulary tests the significance level is $p < 0.02$, while for summary writing and creative tasks - $p < 0.05$.

Students' reflections on writing tasks

As it has already been mentioned, the reflection on the utility of class activities to learning during the academic year makes an important contribution to assessment. The excerpts from the reflections of some students are reproduced below. The language has not been corrected for the sake of authenticity, and the names of students are omitted in order to preserve anonymity.

It is obvious from these reflections that learners sincerely describe their experiences in conducting written work because they have come to realize the importance of self-evaluation in learning. Critical thinking about the achievements or failures encourages a learner to make more efforts to learn better.

Student 1. Writing portfolio contributions was easy because I knew exactly what and how I should do them. I think it is useful to keep the contributions in a dossier because the portfolio content shows what I have done during the course and how I progressed.

Student 2. All materials that we are collecting in the portfolio help us to observe our progress or regress. I can evaluate my work of several months

| Survey statements                                                                 | Agree, % | Not sure, % | Disagree, % |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Writing definitions of professional vocabulary terms is beneficial to linguistic development. | 73       | 19          | 8           |
| 2. Writing summaries of professional texts is useful for developing writing skills. | 56       | 29          | 15          |
| 3. Writing creative essays is useful for linguistic development. | 62       | 26          | 12          |
| 4. Written testing of professional vocabulary is beneficial to learning. | 79       | 21          | 0           |
and decide if I make enough efforts to improve my language skills. I am pleased with my progress - I work hard.

Student 3. Creative tasks for me are unclear and sometimes strange. Even if I can find some information, it is hard to say what the key meaning is. Moreover, I want to write something interesting, but I fail to do it.

Student 4. Grammar was my weak spot. Now I feel I’ve improved it. I succeeded because I liked what and how we were learning. I think that writing essays was good for me. I was able to express my own viewpoint on subjects of interest in my own way. That is why I succeeded in doing such tasks.

Student 5. Portfolios were very useful to me. I have improved my writing and reading skills, built up vocabulary; writing definitions and vocabulary tests helped me to remember new terminology. I learned to use different dictionaries, on paper and online. Computer tasks were the most interesting, entertaining and exciting. They helped me to improve my language skills.

Student 6. I learned to use different dictionaries, on paper and online. Computer tasks were the most interesting, entertaining and exciting. They helped me to improve my writing.

Student 7. Writing is the activity I dislike. However, I think I have improved my writing skills because I tried doing my best.

Student 8. I did not like writing summaries, it was a new task that I have never done before. But I improved my grammar and writing skills as a result of this training.

Conclusions

Students’ reflections on the utility of various written tasks in ESP classes offer insights into learning progress. Given the disparity of usefulness scores, it is apparent that only statistical processing might provide further clarification. The computation of t-coefficients and significance levels allows us to clarify the uncertainty in utility scores for a small sample of 60 students-respondents.

In teaching English in higher education teachers need to examine learners’ ongoing self-evaluation which can help teachers cater to changing students’ needs. For this purpose, learner’s individual written reflections and self-assessment in the form of their contributions to portfolios might serve best due to opportunity to analyze students’ individual difficulties and dislikes, i.e. attitudes to grammar, writing essays or summarising professional texts. Individualized approach allows teachers to gain each learner’s trust and think of the ways of fostering their linguistic development.

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Studentų rašto darbų apmąstymai universiteto studijose

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Studentų aktyvus dalyvavimas, vertinant savo mokymąsi, ir refleksinių gebėjimų vystymas yra pagrindiniai sėkmingų studijų veiksniai. Šis tyrimas skirtas nagrinėti, kaip studentai vertina savo rašto darbus anglų specialybės kalbos studijoje. Darbui buvo sukurta anketa, kuri leido apklausti studentus ir išsiaiškinti jų požiūrį į įvairių užduočių naudingumą bei aprašyti savo pamąstymus apie sėkmingas ar nesėkmingas mokymosi užduotis. Rašto užduotys buvo įvairių rūsių, pavyzdžiui: santraukos, esė, kompiuterinės užduotys, pastabos apie įvairias veiklos formas bei studentų pamąstymai apie sėkmingus ir nesėkmingus darbus. Respondentai buvo Mykolo Romerio universiteto Socialinės politikos fakulteto studentai.

Gauti rezultatai parodė, kad savianalizė yra veiksminga priemonė lingvistiniam tobulėjimui. Studentų pamąstymai atskleidė jų požiūrius ir nuovoką apie įvairių užduočių naudingumą, tobulinant kalbos įgūdžius. Refleksinė praktika gali padėti dėstytojams spręsti specifinius sunkumus, atsirandančius užsienio specialybės kalbos pratybose. Studentų mokymas naudotis refleksiniais metodais yra naudingas mokymosi visą gyvenimą perspektyvai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: anglų specialybės kalba, savianalizė, rašto darbai, refleksija.

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