SELF-ASSESSMENT OF VOCABULARY AND RELEVANT LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR EVALUATION PURPOSES

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Learner self-assessment of linguistic performance has been lately used due to its potential to activate the process of learning. Self-assessment raises learner awareness of language use and leads to developing learner responsibility and autonomy. However, usefulness of self-assessment for evaluation purposes has been scarcely researched.

This paper examines some aspects of learners’ self-assessment for evaluation purposes at tertiary level. Research focuses on self-assessment of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) vocabulary and some language skills relevant for vocabulary retention. Data on learner self-assessment are compared to actual results in tests. The analysis provided points to importance of self-evaluation in language acquisition and suggests practical implications of self-assessment for evaluation.

Keywords: ESP vocabulary, self-assessment, evaluation.

Introduction

Self-assessment is, undoubtedly, a powerful tool in fostering conscious and even self-directed foreign language learning, particularly, for professional purposes. Before proceeding to learn new things, however, one must clearly evaluate what is already known and mastered and what yet needs to be developed. On the other hand, objective evaluation is an inevitable part of any language training. In ESP, apart from institutional standardized final tests, there are special field tests, e.g. BEC (Business English Certificates), TOLES (Test of Legal English Skills), ILEC (International Legal English Certificate), a passing grade of which is mandatory for successful entering and functioning in a target discourse community. The focus of such ESP tests is on technical vocabulary and relevant language skills for its proficient usage. However, a mismatch is quite often observed between an ESP novice’s self-assessment of professional language proficiency and actual performance in real-life job-related situations. Therefore, we believe that it is important to train ESP students to assess themselves because language blunts and mistakes in their professional field could result in possible losses of every kind. The object of our research was self-assessment of ESP skills. The aim of the research was the analysis of its influence on evaluation of learning. The methods of the research include administering questionnaires and analysis of learners’ responses. Our hypothesis for the present study was that less than half of our ESP students realistically evaluate their scope of mastered professional vocabulary and directly linked language skills – namely, reading and comprehension of large-scale professional texts and speaking on subject-related topics.
Overview of literature on self-assessment and evaluation

The new educational challenges for non-abstract learning (Knapper & Cropley 2000; Field 2000) – among them, emphasis on learning to learn and internal (self-) guidance, diminishing external guidance by a teacher - highlights the importance to evaluate the effectiveness of one’s own performance in learning a foreign language. Self-assessment of one’s language skills followed up by reflections on learning outcomes raises learner awareness of language use and leads to developing learner responsibility and autonomy.

Self-assessment derives its theoretical justification from a number of well-established principles of the second language acquisition. The principle of autonomy stands out as one of the primary foundation stones of successful learning. Intrinsic motivation is at the top of the list of successful acquisition of language skills (Douglas Brown 2004: 270).

Self-assessment is one of the six alternative forms (portfolios, journals, conferences, interviews, observations, and peer-assessment) used for language skills assessment. A summary of these assessment alternatives with regard to their fulfillment of the major assessment principles (practicality, reliability, face validity, content validity, feedback, and authenticity) is in detail described by Douglas Brown (2004).

The usefulness of self-assessment for learning purposes is widely analyzed and accepted while it is far less common for evaluation purposes. Up till present we tracked only one study tackling this issue – “Using Self-Assessment for Evaluation” by R. W. Todd (Todd 2002: 16).

Nevertheless, evaluation is considered to be one of the key stages in ESP, alongside with teaching and learning, mainly because it is very important in establishing effectiveness.

The main data collection methods for evaluation are checklists, assessments, discussions, and record keeping (Dudley-Evans & John 1998: 137): “checklists are used for qualitative evaluation; assessments include formal and informal judgments of students’ performance and progress through class work, assignments and tests are quantitative; discussions are used for qualitative and quantitative evaluation; record keeping is a must – it can include teacher’s and students’ records (diaries / journals). However, systematicity is essential in evaluation”.

Most teachers argue against self-assessment for evaluation purposes because, apart from being usually unystematic, it is “subjective, unreliable, open to cheating and more reflective of the learner’s self-image than actual performance and ability” (Todd 2002: 17). To increase reliability, self-assessment needs to be guided by detailed scoring criteria.

Student self-scoring is probably most easily performed in the field of using specialized target discourse community vocabulary.

Vocabulary remains an important indicator of proficiency in language acquisition and therefore learners do their best to pursue its perfection. Moreover, vocabulary is particularly relevant to the content of English for Specific Purposes courses. However, teaching/learning vocabulary involves dealing with various types of meaning, such as propositional meaning, register, metaphorical meaning, connotational meaning, and the representation of meaning such as definition, relationships – synonymy, autonomy, hyponymy, meronymy, collocation, translation, etc. An extensive and comprehensive research into vocabulary teaching was conducted by P. Nation (2005). All the above-mentioned complexity and other factors could produce poor correlations between student preliminary self-assessment of ESP vocabulary and actual test results, increased by lack of student training in self-evaluation.

Objectives of research

In this study, we aimed at examining correlations of learners’ self-assessment and their evaluation at tertiary level. Research focuses on student self-assessment of ESP vocabulary
and some language skills that are relevant for vocabulary development and retention.

The data on learner self-assessment and anticipated performance are compared with teacher obtained results in tests. The comparison is believed to shed light on causes of linguistic deficit in language acquisition and on importance of learner self-assessment for the overall objective evaluation based on student linguistic performance.

**Research methods and participants**

The respondents were day-time students who mainly study English for law and law related fields, e.g. Law and Criminal Justice, Law and Customs Activities at tertiary level. There were 150 participants altogether at an intermediate level, the size of respondent classes varying from 12 to 15 students in a class. Students were aged between 19 and 25 years old. Total time spent in L2 environment is 4 hours a week for 3 semesters, which amounts to 192 hours of instruction.

Research employed both interim and end-of-course questionnaires on students’ self-assessment of language skills in ESP classes and written learners’ evaluations of their performance in various activities throughout learning period.

It should be noted that both self-assessment and formal evaluation is based on a 10 score scale, 10 being “excellent” and 5 – the least admissible score of “weak”.

**Data on learners’ self-assessment during the course**

It is well known that knowledge of vocabulary determines proficiency in speaking, writing and reading. It was of particular interest to find out how learners grade their knowledge of vocabulary and relevant language skills. Ideally, the richer vocabulary, the better productive / receptive skills are, thus learner grades are expected to reflect this congruity.

The data (obtained after one third of envisaged tuition) on learner self-assessment of some language skills from the point-of-view of relevant ESP vocabulary are displayed in Table 1.

Quite surprisingly, none of the students doubt their knowledge of professional vocabulary: distribution in vocabulary knowledge being 70 % excellent, very good and good against 30 % not so good (intermediate and satisfactory).

Nevertheless, students’ self-assessment of writing skill is the least favourite: none feel they are either excellent or very good. Good and intermediate make 50 %, and another half is weak or satisfactory. It could be very interesting to analyze the validity of such self-assessment and reasons for possible divergence.

Speaking skills seem to be assessed favourably – as many as 45 % of students consider speaking ability excellent, very good or good, 30 % as intermediate and only 25 % as satisfactory or week.

Consequently, there should be more fluent speakers than the Table 1 displays, because it is

| Self-assessment | Vocabulary Acquisition, % | Writing, % | Speaking skill, % | Reading, % |
|-----------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| Excellent       | 5 %                       | –          | 5 %               | 20 %       |
| Very good       | 15 %                      | –          | 10 %              | 30 %       |
| Good            | 50 %                      | 10 %       | 30 %              | 40 %       |
| Intermediate    | 20 %                      | 40 %       | 30 %              | 10 %       |
| Satisfactory    | 10 %                      | 30 %       | 15 %              | –          |
| Weak            | –                         | 20 %       | 10 %              | –          |
well known that fluent speaking on professional topics is interrelated with good knowledge of vocabulary.

None of the respondents feel, though, that their reading skills are poor. It is well known that reading skills are seldom tested at tertiary level, thus some reading comprehension shortcomings are easily concealed.

The purpose of this study requested comparison of the above-presented data with the actual student performance in vocabulary testing. Vocabulary testing data are shown in Table 2. For more impartial consideration, the results display students’ average marks in a few – not one – vocabulary tests given at the same time (one third of the course).

Table 2. Learners’ performance in written ESP vocabulary tests

| Test grades | Vocabulary |
|-------------|------------|
| Excellent   | 5 %        |
| Very good   | 10 %       |
| Good        | 10 %       |
| Intermediate| 20 %       |
| Satisfactory| 15 %       |
| Weak        | 25 %       |
| Poor        | 15 %       |

As it can be seen in Table 2, 40 % of learners (weak – 25 %, and poor – 15 %) demonstrate inadequate use of vocabulary. It is noteworthy, that while none of the students themselves considered to be below acceptable line of proficiency in ESP vocabulary, as much as 15 % – nearly 1/6 of all the respondent body – proved to possess inadequate knowledge of it. Again, it would be important to look into the reasons of such a result divergence. Only 25 % are proficient users: excellent – 5 %, very good – 10 %, and good –10 %. The rest 35 % are in the middle of being intermediate and satisfactory users.

It is also interesting to note that those 5 % who assessed their vocabulary acquisition as excellent displayed exactly the same results in tests. The difference in percentage of those very good is also minimal. But a great difference between “good” – 50 % in self-assessment and only 10 % in actual vocabulary tests (!) - questions the validity of self-assessment to some extent.

It is absolutely obvious from the presented data that even 40 % of learners overestimate their knowledge of ESP vocabulary, despite the fact that this was written performance in vocabulary tests: they are not as demanding as oral tests since recalling necessary vocabulary items impromptu is even more problematic than doing it in writing when there is more thinking time.

Learner self-overestimation intrigued research interest, therefore, in order to have a more accurate basis to claim tendency for self-overestimation and be aware of its scope, it was suggested to indicate what mark or score our learners predicted themselves in similar vocabulary tests.

Learners’ perception of vocabulary knowledge through self-evaluation of anticipated performance in these tests is shown in Fig 1. Only 10 % estimate their would-be performance in vocabulary test accurately. 35 % of students misplace themselves for a higher score by 1 point, and the same number – by 2 points. 20 % of learners expect to get higher marks by even 3 points. These deviations by 2 or 3 points show how mistaken learners are about their knowledge of ESP vocabulary.

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Monitoring learner progress

One of the most important factors in effective learning is monitoring students’ progress. Learners need to recognize their lacks and to be able to note their accomplishments. Student’s success is bound to lead to the enhanced motivation and their confidence in using ESP language. Fostering learners’ positive attitudes is vital in the language learning process (Henry 2003).

Table 3 displays the post-course investigation of learners’ success experiences. Learners have been most successful at making presentations, learning professional vocabulary and translating from English into the native language. This is diagrammed below: 70 % of students think that their skills in listening comprehension have improved greatly; 80 % of learners are proud of their oral presentations; 90 % feel their performance in ESP vocabulary tests has been praiseworthy. As many as 85 % of students are sure they are good at translating professional texts from L2 into L1.

Table 3. Post-course perceptions of success experience in learning ESP vocabulary

| Successful activity          | Percentage of students |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| ESP vocabulary               | 90 %                   |
| Presentations                | 80 %                   |
| Listening practice           | 70 %                   |
| Translation from L2 into L1  | 85 %                   |

Conclusions

Objective (teacher and peer) evaluation is vital to monitor the learners’ progress and to measure whether the learners’ language skills are appropriate for the smooth entry into target discourse community.

Vocabulary and its usage play an important role in evaluation of learners’ special field linguistic competence. However, learners’ ability to evaluate their own language performance and usage is not always impartial. Very often learners misinterpret their ability to convey information and ideas on a different and higher than everyday-language level.

Our research shows that more than 2/3 of learners tend to overestimate their proficiency in ESP vocabulary. The key cause of linguistic deficit might be learners’ inability to internalize knowledge of ESP vocabulary, i.e. to transfer knowledge to its usage.

Therefore, it is important to develop learner awareness on how well they have mastered the target discourse community language and what areas still need to be developed. In other words, the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of one’s own performance in a foreign language is an important learning skill. Training learners in self-monitoring and self-evaluating is essential – it is a “must” in achieving the goals of a course. Self-evaluation encourages students to become independent learners, allows them to perceive the outcomes of their learning and can increase their motivation for future efforts.

Practical implications of self-assessment for evaluation are: 1) students have to designate clear goals in learning, and 2) afterwards, measure their performance against set targets; 3) students need to be taught strategies for self-monitoring and self-grading. Otherwise learners either underestimate or overestimate their language knowledge (e.g. vocabulary) or performance (skills of writing, speaking or reading).

Further research into other possible reasons of student over/under-estimation—either psychological personality issues or failure to realize the full scope of required proficiency in target discourse community vocabulary – might be very useful for teaching/learning purposes.

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SUBJEKTYVI IR OBJEKTYVI SPECIALYBĖS UŽSIENIO KALBOS SAVIANALIZĖ

Violeta Janulevičienė, Galina Kavaliauskienė

Mokant užsienio kalbų, gana dažnai akcentuojamas besimokančiųjų savianalizės būtumas, nes tai skatina sąmoningą mokymąsi, t. y. didina studento atsakomybę ir autonomiją, padeda geriau suvokti kalbos vartojimo subtilybes. Tačiau savianalizės ir objektyvaus vertinimo santykis bei adekvatumas iki šiol itin menkai tyrinėtas.

Straipsnyje šios koreliacijos analizuojamos universiteto lygiu: studentų savianalizės duomenys įvairiomis dimensijomis lyginti su objektyviais testų ir egzaminų rezultatais, pateikiami savianalizės ir vertinimo neatitikimų bei jų galimų priežasčių analizė. Tyrime išryškėję fakta, kad tik 10 % studentų objektyviai vertina savo specialybės leksines žinias bei kalbinius gebėjimus, skatina ieškoti praktinių būdų atotrūkiui jveikti ir padėti besimokantiesiems teisingai ir adekvačiai vertinti savo žinias, kalbos įgūdžius ir gebėjimus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: specialybės kalbos leksika, savianalizė, objektyvus vertinimas.

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