Abstract

Since the last two decades, training students in self-assessment has gained increasing currency and has been investigated in a considerable number of studies. In line with this background, the present study aimed at investigating the potential of self-assessment initiatives in bringing about change in Iranian EFL students’ self-assessment ability and attitudes (anxiety, confidence and motivation) towards studying English. One hundred students participated in the study in a pre-test post-test control group design. The results indicated a significant effect of self-assessment initiatives in enhancing the students’ willingness and ability to engage in self-assessment and in creating positive outlooks toward English language learning. The implications of self-assessment in ELT are discussed.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, training students to monitor their own learning has gained a great deal of importance. One’s ability to be aware of and monitor one’s own learning process is defined as metacognition (Garrett, J., Alman, M., Gardner, S., & Born, C 2007). Self-assessment is considered to have a key role in metacognition. Imel (2002) recognizes two kinds of metacognitive skills; one is self-assessment (also termed self-rating, self-evaluation or self-cognition and the other is self-appraisal) or the ability to assess one’s own cognition and the other is self-management or the ability to manage one’s further cognitive development. Therefore, learners who use metacognitive self-assessment are aware of their abilities and perform better than those who are unaware of their abilities. Self-assessment is defined as involving students into the process of the assessment of their own learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Tan, 2007). Student self-assessment is an important strategy to involve them into their own assessment process of learning. The effect of self-assessment on language teaching and learning has been described and researched in a large number of studies (see Maslovaty & Kuzi, 2002; Pope, 2005; Sadler, 2006; Tan, 2004, 2007). In language teaching, self-assessment is often used to promote student centered learning, to boost insight into the learning process and to encourage active learning. There are also practicality issues regarding using self-assessment: self-assessment can save the teacher correction time and support students in dealing with often very individual weaknesses. Investigations concerning self-assessment in language learning in
general have examined the value of self-assessment in proficiency testing with participants of all ages (Blance & Merino, 1989). Sadler (2006) points out that although a teacher can provide environments to facilitate growth or progress, the student is the one who must take action to fill the "gap" between where she currently is in terms of understanding and where she is heading. Thus, students are expected to continuously monitor and evaluate their own learning and think about the ways to improve it.

2. Theoretical Framework

Self-assessment is often recognized as one form of the broader area of alternative assessment, which has been defined by Hancock (1995) as: "an ongoing process involving the students and teacher in making judgments about the students' progress in language using non-conventional strategies" (p. 3). According to Brown and Hudson (1998), the use of portfolios, self-assessment procedures and other such types of alternative assessment, may be characterized by being carried out in the context in which the learning takes place, allowing students to be assessed on what they normally do in class, encouraging disclosure of standards and rating criteria to students, and requiring students to perform or do something while providing information about their strengths and weaknesses. Self-assessment is one form of alternative assessment which seeks to make the assessment process more student-centered so as to better support and maximize the learning taking place. The literature on self-assessment encompasses a number of potential benefits and drawbacks associated with its use. Potential problems with students using self-assessment include: inaccuracy of student judgments, self-assessment being prone to evaluative biases, students having limited experience of assessing themselves, student perception of assessment as being the teachers’ responsibility and last but not least unreliability of scoring procedure. Among the potential benefits of self-assessment we can mention: its direct integration into the teaching/learning process, encouraging and increasing student motivation, reducing the teachers’ assessment burden, and once again last but not least leading to increased involvement of student in monitoring and assessing their language performance. As mentioned, Self-assessment (henceforth: SA) has been a prominent area of research on issues of proficiency, ability and task-performance for language learners. Chappelle and Brindley (2002) summarize the major insights on SA practice: a. the importance of providing students with training in the use of SA techniques; ability to self-assess should not be taken for granted. b. the transparency of the assessment instrument impacts accurate self-assessment. 3. SA scales are most effective when statements they include are situation specific and have a close relation to students’ personal experiences. 4. student’s willingness to self-assess and also the accuracy of that assessment may be affected by cultural factors. Ross (2006) report finding across a variety of grades and subjects, persuasive evidence that SA made contributions to improved behavior and student learning, as well as higher achievement by students. Harris (1997) explained that the potential power of SA procedures in affecting students is based on the simple fact that the assessment focus is on student-controlled. Based on Black et al. (2003) Self-assessment is a fundamental component of the assessment for learning movement, originating in mainstream education in the UK. In Black and Williams’ (1998) seminal review of the formative assessment literature, they contend that self-assessment lies at the heart of assessment for learning for two reasons: it is a way of informing and involving the students themselves in the assessment process and it is a means by which they take responsibility for their own learning. Assessment for Learning encourages teachers to equip students with the capacity and desire to take charge of their own learning through developing self-assessment skills, and it forms an important theoretical base for this investigation. Harrison, Head, Haugh, and Sanderson (2005) focused on self-assessment and its uses to motivate active class participation. The authors describe a number of SA approaches used in their classes at a Japanese university, and student reactions to them. These included scoring of class participation in notebooks, action logs and class journals related to class learning and progress made, self-evaluation handouts, and learning journals. A questionnaire to gauge student reactions to SA indicated that self-assessment may lead to: positive learner outcomes such as increases in active participation and L2 communication, student thinking about progress, student confidence, and increased awareness of the connection between active participation and English language skill improvement. Harrison et al. (2005) also include a number of principles to guide instructors who wish to implement a SA framework. These principles include the importance of the fit between the teacher’s style, classroom approaches and the kind of SA carried out, the need for repeated opportunities for SA, and the fact that students will find SA easier if the procedures
used have detailed, specific criteria. They concluded that students can make a connection between self-evaluation and active class participation and that this mode of assessment can provide a tool to assist students in more fully realizing their learning potential. The paper by Harrison et al. (2005) does not include any of the self-assessment rubrics actually used by students. Also, in the otherwise extensive body of SA literature, not enough is known about what students actually do, think and feel when they are asked to engage in self-assessment (Andrade & Du, 2007).

3. Research Question

The purpose of this study is to find the answer to the following questions:
1. Does locus of control have a significant effect on the students’ attitude towards self-assessment?
2. Does gender have a significant effect on the students’ attitude towards self-assessment?
3. Does level of proficiency have a significant effect on the students’ attitude towards self-assessment?
4. Do motivation, anxiety and self-confidence have any significant effect on the students’ self-assessment?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

One hundred and twenty students were randomly selected from 120 undergraduate senior EFL students of English majors at the Islamic Azad University, Ilam Branch. They were both male and female with the average age of 21 years and had three years of experiencing learning English as a foreign language. All of the 120 people have been familiarized with different self-assessment activities in the previous courses that the first writer of this study has taught.

4.2. Instrumentation

Four different instruments were used in this study. First, a retired TOEFL test was administered to determine the current proficiency level of the participants. Second a self-assessment questionnaire was administered to determine the students’ attitude towards self-assessment. Third a locus of control questionnaire was administered to determine the locus of control orientation of the students and finally a questionnaire measuring students’ motivation, anxiety and self-confidence was used to determine their general attitudes towards learning English.

4.3. Procedure

A total of the four tasks were administered and required from participants to perform. First a retired TOEFL test was administered to determine the proficiency level of the students. The rationale for utilizing retired TOEFL test was its high reliability and validity. Participants were divided into two groups, A and B, based on their scores on the TOEFL test. Group A was considered as highly proficient group and group B was considered as less proficient group. Second Rotter’s Locus of Control questionnaire measuring locus of control orientation of the students was administered to determine the locus of control orientation of the students. Third a self-assessment questionnaire measuring students’ attitude towards self-assessment was employed. The questionnaire was constructed by the researchers. To determine the reliability and validity of the items of the questionnaire a pilot study was done. The obtained reliability and validity of the questionnaire, using Factor analysis and Cornbach Alpha, were .80 and .76 respectively. Finally a questionnaire measuring students’ motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence in learning English in general was used to determine students’ self-confidence, motivation and their anxiety in learning English. In order to determine the reliability and validity of the constructed questionnaire, a pilot study was done. The obtained reliability and validity of the questionnaire, using Factor analysis and Cronbach Alpha, were .78 and .74 respectively.
5. Results and Discussion

Before doing any quantitative analyses, the reliabilities and validities of the instruments employed in the present study were examined. The reliabilities and the validities of all instruments were reasonably high. After determining the reliability and validity of the employed instruments they were administered among the learners. The following section deals with the results and discussion of the answer to the questions put forward at the beginning of the studies individually:

Question One:

Does locus of control have a significant effect on the students’ attitude towards self-assessment?

By locus of control, it means that to the extent to which an individual believes that he/she is able to control events that affect him/her. Highly internal locus of control oriented individuals believe that events result primarily from their own behavior and actions while highly external locus of control oriented individuals believe that powerful others, fate, or chance primarily determine events. Highly internal locus of control oriented individuals have better control of their behavior and tend to exhibit more political behaviors than externals and are more likely to attempt to influence other people; they are more likely to assume that their efforts will be successful. Internally locus of control oriented individuals, are more active in seeking information and knowledge concerning their situation than do external locus of control oriented individuals.

The tendency to engage in political behavior is stronger for individuals who have a high internal locus of control than for those who have a high external locus of control. For assessing individuals’ degree of locus of control Rotter’s Locus of Control Scale was employed. As the following table shows students having internal locus of control had a better attitude toward self-assessment. This result is in line with Haborg (1996) who concludes that having high levels of internal locus of control is more significant variable than intelligence or socioeconomic status.

Table 1:

| loc   | N   | Mean  | SD    | SD for Mean | sig | Mean Difference |
|-------|-----|-------|-------|-------------|-----|-----------------|
| internal | 51  | 8.9804| 3.34359| .46820      | .002| 1.74851         |
| external | 69  | 7.2319| 2.78729| .33555      | .003| 1.74851         |

Question Two:

Does gender have a significant effect on the students’ attitude towards self-assessment?

Regarding the answer to this question, as the following table shows, it was found that both male and female students have similar attitudes towards self-assessment and there is no significant difference between them in this regards.

Table 2:

| gender | N   | Mean  | SD    | SD for Mean | sig | Mean Difference |
|--------|-----|-------|-------|-------------|-----|-----------------|
| male   | 51  | 8.0000| 2.81621| .36664      | .932| .04918          |
| female | 69  | 7.9508| 3.45652| .44256      | .932| .04918          |
Question Three:
Does level of proficiency have a significant effect on the students’ attitude towards self-assessment?
As the following tables illustrate, the more proficient the learners are, the more positive attitudes they have towards self-assessment.

| group | N  | Mean  | SD    |
|-------|----|-------|-------|
| low   | 40 | 5.7750| 2.52665|
| medium| 40 | 7.2750| 2.17194|
| high  | 40 | 10.8750| 2.78729|
| total | 120|       |       |

Table 5 shows the individual correlations of these three variables to self-assessment.

| Assessment Score | Sig  | Mean   | Std. Deviation |
|------------------|------|--------|----------------|
| anxiety          | -.769| 24.9583| 8.18730        |
| motivation       | .733 | 24.7000| 8.17518        |
| Self-confidence  | .736 | 24.6417| 8.25517        |
6. Conclusion

According to the above results and discussion the following conclusions were derived:
1. Generally speaking learners had a positive attitude towards self-assessment.
2. Internally oriented locus of control learners had more positive attitude towards self-assessment than their externally oriented counterparts.
3. The more proficient the learners are the more positive attitude they have towards self-assessment.
   Personality characteristics such as motivation, anxiety and self-confidence are good predictors for predicting the degree of attitude towards self-assessment.
4. Both male and female learners had similar attitude towards self-assessment.
5. Therefore it can be concluded that in Iran contexts it is better to make EFL learners familiar with the new forms or alternative forms of assessment such as self-assessment and replace the traditional methods of language assessment with these alternative ones.

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