



**Self-Assessment as a Tool for Improved Writing in an ESL Context:
An Approach toward Action Research**

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Abstract:

This research attempts to explore how self-assessment training affects students' knowledge and understanding of their writing and needs for improvement in the ESL context at an undergraduate writing class. This research considers action research as a method and employs a formative mode of assessment techniques in virtual classroom practices and presents a critique on the dynamic type of assessment and its limitations while assessing language skills in general and writing skills in particular. The study suggests formative methods of assessment which not only ensures the quality of assessment techniques but is also pertinent for the quality learning of the assesseees in the ESL context. Results reflect analysis of classroom observation, field notes, face-to-face interviews with students, and virtual and written artifacts.

Keywords: Self-Assessment, Action Research, Teaching-Practicum, Writing Skills, ESL

INTRODUCTION

The concept of mainstream assessment is often connected to the report cards or progress reports often prepared by the teachers and is reported in the form of numbers, grades, or percentages that seriously overlook the entire essence of learning and teaching especially when students are learning English as a second or foreign language context. If the students are aimed to prepare for the challenges of the twenty-first century, then it is of utmost importance to take students as important stakeholders in the process of assessment. It has been noticed that students face difficulties in improving their academic writing skills to meet the objective of their course. The preliminary investigation reveals that the problem has been caused by dependence on a single approach of instruction and standardized assessment practice. A recent shift from Face-to-Face teaching to online teaching has raised multiple concerns owing to the potential to promote learning,

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assessment practices, and pedagogical implications. The main thrust of the study stems from this issue that teacher's assessment practices have been mystified by various factors such as delayed or vague feedback and students feel pupils with low self-direction and effectiveness in writing continue to feel frustrated and keep making the same mistakes with little development from one writing job to the next in an ESL context because they have no say in evaluating their writing skills to improve. Therefore, this study argues that the prevalent summative standardized assessment practices have been insufficient while assessing students' writing skills in an ESL context. A need exists for assessment tools that will help students take active roles in the assessment process and direct them to greater success. The primary purpose of assessment and evaluation should be to inform the learners of their areas of strength and weakness. A four-staged self-evaluation teaching procedure has been used in this study that the researchers modified from the Cooperative Learning Evaluation and Assessment Research Group (Rolheiser, 1996). Students are specifically taught how to evaluate themselves during this training procedure.

Keeping in view these existing practices, the study has been designed to investigate the impact of a self-assessment training program contributes to students' writing achievement in an ESL context and how they reflect on self-assessment practice to better understand their weaknesses and strengthen argumentative writing skills. This study has the following objectives:

- To determine the viability of self-assessment training during a writing workshop
- To explore the impact of self-assessment training on students' knowledge and understanding of their writing skills
- To document the changes in students' writing achievement during this program

This study attempts to answer the following two research questions; how far does the self-assessment training influence students' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in their writing and their ability to reflect on their writing with more precision? Does this self-assessment training bring changes in their writing achievement as measured during this action research program?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gardner (1991) describes assessment as "the obtaining of information about the skills and potentials of individuals, with the dual goals of providing useful feedback to the individuals and useful data to the surrounding community" (Perrone, 1991: 90). Assessment can be made authentic if it brings real-life connections in a classroom and it challenges the actual participants (Andrade, 1999; Coie, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, Ramy, Shure & Long 1993). Such authentic assessment provides students with many opportunities to achieve what they aspire to (Wiggins, 1989). It gives teachers a better idea and understanding of students' commands and they can promptly respond to students' needs. Self-assessment is a continuum that encourages students to practice critical thinking skills and leads them to be autonomous learners. Stiggins (1994) argues that "our comprehensive re-examination of achievement targets over the past decade has revealed that students' self-assessment is not just an engaging activity. Rather, it turns out to be the very heart of academic competence" (p. 33). Hence, the self-assessment approach fosters competencies in students.

Self-assessment comes under the formative assessment model that helps students understand the main goal of their learning and what they need to achieve within a timeframe in a classroom context (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It cultivates self-regulation that is guided by meta-cognitive skills that involve students in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their progress (Butler & Winne, 1995). The use of rubrics in a writing class helps students become self-regulated learners while keeping them motivated (Andrade, 2000; Willingham, 2009). Kulm (1994) suggests that the process of self-evaluation starts when teachers involve students in the construction and designing of scoring rubrics which students then use to evaluate their work (Harris, 1996). It has been argued that even the joint effort of constructing and designing rubrics might not be sufficient to focus student attention if the rubrics are too general, too task-specific, or too intricate for students to use readily (Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1999).

The assessment process acts as an ultimate tool that can keep students motivated in their academic journey or can altogether turn out to be an impasse. According to Stiggins (2000), teachers can enhance or destroy students' desire to succeed in school quicker and permanently through their use of assessment than with any other tools at their disposal. The teacher's most important challenge is to effectively manage the relationship between assessment and student motivation and keep their self-efficacy intact. Successes raise efficacy and failures lower it (Schunk, 2003).

Some notable studies have been conducted to measure students' self-efficacies and the role of assessment practices. Goodrich and Boulay (2003) studied the impact of self-assessment on 7th and 8th-grade students' written essays. The results from this study indicated a constructive correlation between the treatment and students' grades (Andrade & Boulay, 2003). Research with university student subjects shows that the accuracy of self-appraisals increases when all stakeholders such as students and teachers agree on assessment criteria and when students are required to justify their assessments (Andrade, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 1989). Across all these studies, alternative assessment practices like self-evaluation have shown some success for students. Students who have received training in evaluating their work against given criteria have been better able to perform well in their writing tasks in an ESL context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this action research, to answer the proposed research questions, a mixed-method design was used to gather holistic data on students' perceptions of their writing during a self-assessment training module. Researchers like Greene (2008) endorsed qualitative as well as quantitative data to gain insight. Such inquiry could set off 'important understandings through the juxtaposition of different lenses, perspectives, and stances' (p. 208). Moreover, during an action research study, the researchers relied on their observation and reflection and used these two tools as major tools for data collection, but the researchers wanted their observations to be backed by quantitative data to approve or disapprove of the change during these writing workshops. Consequently, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods can provide a holistic understanding of the results than either method used alone.

For qualitative data, through students' interviews and the teacher's observation and reflection process, the students were able to evaluate and explain how they perceived their writing, before and after this self-assessment training and how helpful this training had been to them. The

qualitative research, thus, contributed to the validation and interpretation of quantitative findings. For quantitative data, during this action research study, the use of frequency charts to view the rate of occurrence of each writing component that students referred to in their interviews. In addition, writing scores gave a clear indication of the differences between achievement before and after the treatment of self-evaluation training. With the use of a questionnaire that had a rating scale, the researchers were able to determine the difference in scores in self-efficacy before and after treatment. An explanatory design was adopted, whereby achievement results in argumentative and self-efficacy results in the questionnaire were first collected and analyzed. The qualitative data from the interviews were used to refine the quantitative findings.

Population and Sampling

The target population group for this study was undergraduate students at a private higher institution in Pakistan, from various academic departments pursuing majors in various fields of specialization. However, there was one commonality among all these students they had studied basic-level writing courses already and now they all are in their second year of studies. The study mainly had been conducted online due to the closure of all academic institutions in Pakistan and it spanned over four weeks. There were twenty-five students, both male and female. Out of 25 students, 20 students agreed to be part of this study, and consent was obtained from each participant before the start of this self-assessment training program. They were allocated a teaching time of one hour every day from Monday to Thursday, dividing the research into two cycles. It is vital to mention that all these students are non-native speakers of English and are studying English as a second language.

Data Collection

This study was conducted during two consecutive cycles. During this unit of instructions, the researchers designed this project to investigate the effects of self-assessment of students' writing skills on their efforts to implement formative assessment practices in an ESL classroom and to explore the crucial factors that foster learning in ESL students from becoming more-able writers. The learning activities were undertaken both by pair work, and group work interaction. On the first day, the students were asked to fill out a survey to gauge their self-efficacy in argumentative writing before the start of this training program.

The data collection procedure was through a qualitative approach. For this research, the researchers used the action research model of Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) which comprised four phases: plan, act, observe, and reflect. The data collection phase was divided into two subsequent cycles. Each cycle lasted for one week and included four procedures of plan, act, observe, and reflect: comprising a total of eight hours of student-teacher virtual classroom interaction classroom.

Phase I: Plan: Selection of self-assessment practices and designing the writing task activity,

Phase II: Act: Administering self-assessment practice in writing using a rubric,

Phase III: Observe: Witnessing the participation and performance of the students,

Phase IV: Reflect: Reflections on the outcomes of change and reflection on my teaching,

Material and Procedure

The material required for the study was writing samples of the researchers' previous students who had achieved high scores in the past. Students were asked to write two argumentative tasks (Calkins, 2006). Furthermore, exemplars of argumentative tasks were taken from the previous class students of academic writing task, a course taught at a private educational institute. These three weeks of writer's workshop embarked students on the journey through several stages of the writing process. The students started by jotting down their ideas on a piece of paper then selecting the topic, framing their opinions on their selected topics, and finally gathering data to back their opinions through different available sources. They presented their ideas, discussed them with their class fellows to get their peers' feedback on the selected issues, and produced alternative plans. Through several scaffolding activities, the students drafted their first draft and developed their thesis statements for their essays. In the revision process, they reread, edited, and proofread to make their writings error-free. They also took care of paragraph structures as this assignment required them to produce a four-paragraph essay that included an introduction, main body, and conclusion. In their final drafts, they took care of the layout and organization of their essays.

After the students finished their first writing drafts by the end of the first week, the students were asked to answer these two open-ended interview questions that propelled them to reflect on their first draft:

- a) What was good about your argumentative writing?
- b) How could you have improved it further?

In the second week, all these students had been given training on self-assessment that taught them explicitly how to self-assess using a four-stage approach. This was a training process that explicitly instructed students how to self-evaluate using a four-stage approach. This approach was designed by the Cooperative Learning Evaluation and Assessment Research Group, researched, and used directly in this study (Rolheiser-Bennett, 1996). This four-stage model has the following steps of self-assessment:

- i. Involving students in identifying criteria,
- ii. Student self-evaluating,
- iii. Giving feedback, and
- iv. Helping students set goals.

In the first stage, the students were engaged in defining the criteria to assess their argumentative writing task. This increased student commitment to instructional goals and gave teachers the freedom to influence students' inclinations toward better learning. The specific steps (Rolheiser, 1996) at this stage were as follows:

- i. Students devised a plan for assessment criteria,
- ii. Students and teachers agreed on what should be included or excluded,
- iii. Students and teachers created a rubric,
- iv. Use student language

In the second stage, teachers instructed students on how to incorporate these determined criteria in their writing. As teachers allowed students to get themselves involved in the process of negotiation in stage one, as a result, the criteria would have been based on an integrated set of

curriculum goals and students' personal goals. Given the objectives were not exclusively students' own, therefore, they needed to demonstrate through practical examples what these criteria meant in practice. Such demonstrations and examples helped students comprehend how the criteria were relevant to their needs. At this stage, the following steps were followed:

- i. Illustrated examples,
- ii. Practiced classifying the examples using the criteria generated (Rolheiser, 1996)

At stage three, the students received feedback from the teacher on their self-evaluations. Since the students needed further elaboration on the application of written criteria, they would need constant support from their teachers. Through discussion, students could gain a better understanding of the differences in the data. The specific steps that helped guide students at this phase were:

- i. Provided data for comparison,
- ii. Drew on similarities and differences (Rolheiser, 1996)

In the final stage, teachers helped students develop an action plan for learning strategies and expanded on the efforts that students exerted during the process keeping in view the set objectives. At this stage, the following steps were to be monitored:

- i. Students recognized their weaknesses and strengths,
- ii. Students set goals,
- iii. The teacher guided students to develop precise actions toward their goals,
- iv. Students' targets and action plans were recorded (Rolheiser, 1996)

The students were asked to reach a consensus regarding the criteria that would be used by the teacher to assess their writing and that they would have used for self-assessment. Six writing criteria were chosen: purpose, voice, audience and context, written expression, vocabulary, and meaning, language and word choice, sentence structure, grammar and spelling, sequencing, and organization. The class was then divided into small groups where the students were given one of the six specific writing criteria. In their small groups, they created the standards for a high, medium, and low argumentative piece. The students wrote descriptions for each category and shared them with the rest of the group. The discussion of the descriptors was encouraged, and changes were made until agreement was reached on the descriptors for a high, medium, and low argumentative piece. This process was followed by all criteria. Finally, a class rubric was created at the first stage.

In the second stage, students practiced using the rubric to evaluate other argumentative writing tasks. One criterion at a time was looked at until all six traits were understood. Later, students were instructed to assess other sample argumentative writing tasks based on all these criteria. Through this process, students developed greater clarity regarding the criteria. After the self-evaluation training, students wrote another argumentative task in the same format with no editing with the help of the teacher. After this process took place, students were asked to assess their writing at the third stage of the framework based on the rubric developed by the class. Finally, at the last stage, students had a conference with the teacher about their writing, self-evaluation, and their future writing goals.

Students were interviewed for the second time. In the second open-ended response interview, the following questions were asked.

- a) What is good about your argumentative writing?
- b) How could you improve it further?
- c) What stage of self-assessment was most helpful and why?

Data Analysis

The students completed their self-efficacy survey that was adopted from Graham, Schwartz, and MacArthur's study (1993), and an average of all the scores was made and compared before and after this training of self-assessment (Graham, Schwartz, & MacArthur 1993). All respondents in this research were asked to write an argumentative writing task before and after the self-assessment sessions. These tasks were marked by the instructor and the two scores were compared to see the changes in students' achievement after the self-assessment training. All respondents were asked to respond to the questions on their self-reflection after they had completed their argumentative writing task; and based on their responses, qualitative data was generated that allowed the researchers to analyze it through thematic analysis. During the second writing task, they were asked to respond to two additional questions on their self-assessment training. The researchers' fieldnotes had been used to serve as a source for data collection tools throughout this process of action research cycle as the teachers assumed the role of the researchers too. So, it was essential to this research design to integrate teacher-researchers' field notes in the data for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this action research was to ascertain how the undergraduate students' knowledge and awareness of their writing and areas that needed improvement would change in response to self-evaluation training. The findings of this study indicated that students' expectations were set clearly by the self-evaluation training employed in this study. Students were better able to recognize a strong piece of writing by selecting the criteria and learning to spot them in other works of writing. The students who were selected for closer assessment said that the self-evaluation process was extremely helpful because it allowed them to comprehend the standards, reflect on their work, and create goals. Additionally, teaching students how to evaluate themselves facilitated them to concentrate on crucial writing standards. As students' answers to questions about the positive and challenging aspects of their writing started to vary and reflect more characteristics of the six traits of writing, their knowledge and grasp of the writing criteria improved. When comparing the outcomes of the six different students from various academic levels and genders, the quantitative data showed that the scores on post-treatment narratives did not differ significantly from one other. Results also demonstrated that allowing students to assess their work and discuss that assessment aided in giving teachers access to data that would not otherwise be available.

Based on the data from students' interviews on the quality of their written work, Table 1 presented the key findings and later the students' areas of strengths and weaknesses were discussed.

Table 1. (Response of Q1)

Traits	Before Self-Assessment Session - Argumentative Writing Task 1 Percentage of Responses	After Self-Assessment Session - Argumentative Writing Task II - Percentage of Responses
	n = 18	n = 20
Purpose, Voice, Audience, and Context	55.4	42.5
Sequencing & Organization	13	10.4
Language and Word Choice	2.1	8.5
Sentence Structure	0	7.5
Word Choice	9.8	11.3
Grammar & Spellings	8.7	16
Affective Responses	9.8	3.8
Other	1	0

Table 2. (Response of Q2)

Traits	Before Self-Assessment Session - Argumentative Writing Task 1 Percentage of Responses	After Self-Assessment Session - Argumentative Writing Task II - Percentage of Responses
	n = 17	n = 20
Purpose, Voice, Audience, and Context	55.4	42.5
Sequencing & Organization	13	10.4
Language and Word Choice	2.1	8.5
Sentence Structure	0	7.5
Word Choice	9.8	11.3
Grammar & Spellings	8.7	16
Affective Responses	9.8	3.8
Other	1	0

When the students were asked to respond to the question on their strengths, there were fewer responses on the first writing task, but they increased during the second writing task after the self-assessment sessions. However, after the self-assessment sessions, while there were fewer

responses on the areas of their improvement, students were more interested in boasting about their strengths in writing.

The research findings indicated that students' understanding of the targeted goals and criteria increased after the self-assessment training. Evidence of this could be found in their second drafts of argumentative writing. Subsequently, it was noteworthy to see each writing criterion individually. Among the argumentative writing criteria, the first criterion was the purpose, voice, audience, and context. Within this criterion, students were more concerned about the targeted audience that they were writing for and writing about as most of them responded that *'they need to have a clear objective in mind before writing an argumentative piece.'* Though students also showed interest in the choice of their context and topic and most students delved into the topic of 'Online Learning' as they found it most relevant to the recent context.

The second argumentative writing criterion was written expression, vocabulary, and meaning. As for this criterion, it was found that students were little inclined toward their overall written expression, but they were curious to use the new vocabulary word in their prose. One of them responded, *'I wanted to learn and use new words in my essay.'* The third writing criterion was language and word choice. This writing trait had the most impact on students' writing skills if it were compared to students' writing before and after the self-assessment treatment. Students became more aware of the fact that they needed to use appropriate language as per the academic standards, though they also acknowledged that they needed to choose words skillfully. The fourth writing criterion was sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. The last writing criterion was sequencing and organization. Before the self-assessment treatment, students realized that they were not in the habit of proofreading their drafts before submission. However, after the treatment, they developed this habit that they found most useful.

Table 3. Percentage of the Responses on Most Useful Stage in Self-Assessment Training

Stage 1 (Involving students in identifying criteria)	Stage 2 (Student self-evaluating)	Stage 3 (Giving feedback)	Stage 4 (Helping students set goals)
8	51	38	3

As per Table 3 above, 51% of the respondents found Stage 2 (Student self-evaluation) to be the most useful. This perhaps helped them learn how to apply what they learned during the training sessions. The stage that stood the second highest in terms of responses received was Stage 3 (Giving feedback). Thirty-eight percent of the respondents found Stage 3 (Giving feedback), i.e., receiving feedback on their writing drafts useful. Stages 1 (Involving students in identifying criteria) and 4 (Helping students set goals), with 8% and 3% responses respectively, rated the lowest in terms of usefulness.

The following Table 4 indicates the results of twenty students' self-efficacy score and their self-assessments before and after the process. The survey reported on three areas that included their perception of how well they performed during the writing processes, a comparison with their class

fellows, and their attitude toward their writing. The results below indicated that there was no major difference in students' self-efficacy levels before and after the session.

Table 4. Average Self-Efficacy Scores of Students' Before and After Self-Assessment Sessions

	Total	Before Session	After Session
Writing Processes	35	25.7	26.5
Comparing Argumentative Writing Ability to others in the class	5	2.9	3.2
Attitude	20	21	20.7

During this action research, the researchers made several observations during the process of students' training and found these observations useful in the key findings. Students observed this process of self-assessment as fruitful and felt included in the process of developing and designing the writing criteria by having a say. Students were interested in learning several cardinal components of argumentative writing and it was interesting to witness the way they were reflecting explicitly on each stage.

At stage one, when students produced their first drafts, they were guided through the process of self-assessment during this action research study. They had plenty of ideas to be included in the rubrics, but it was decided through a class discussion to curtail to four major areas in argumentative writing. However, they needed guidance and expert opinion from the teacher on what to include and exclude in the criteria and use quality language to use and complete the rubric. Congruently, the rubric scale was agreed upon collectively.

In the second stage, students were shown the selected sample papers of their seniors to make them understand what quality argumentative writing tasks demanded. Students made the most of this process and they found it beneficial to identify what essential components of each writing piece through group discussions. In the third stage, students received feedback on their drafts, and it was an achievement for students to produce quality work and quite challenging for the struggling students to push the boundaries, so they could come up to the mark. As the students had become aware of their weaknesses and strengths in writing, it also helped the teacher to get a clear idea about the student's abilities, and consequently, the feedback was based on students' individualized needs.

At the last stage of the self-assessment session, both teacher and students decided on their future writing goals and what they needed to do to achieve those goals. This aspect could be observed in the second interview with the students who were aware of the writing criteria and technique. Eventually, the process of self-assessment proved to be a productive learning experience for identifying their writing needs and realizing their potential.

CONCLUSION

The research objective was to find out the effects of self-assessment during a writing workshop and how it affects students' needs through action research in an ESL context. It also aimed at discovering the pre- and post-results of an argumentative writing task of the students involved in the study. The key findings of this study were that students found it useful to get engaged at all

stages of developing criteria for assessment and they could make the most out of the writing process if clear objectives were laid out and they were exposed to quality writing samples of other students. Thus, this research opened new ways of thinking and research for other researchers in the ESL context. and one of those key takeaways could be to increase the span of this action research cycle of the study to conducted for yielding better fruitful results while having several key-holders on board within an institution. Since the present study solely covers the ESL writing aspect, future research could cover other ESL aspects having larger sample sizes. Therefore, this study offered numerous implications for future ESL research in Pakistan.

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