Achievements in Language Learning through Students' Self-assessment

Inga Nedzinskaitė, Dana Švenčionienė, Daiva Zavistanavičienė

Abstract. Assessment becomes a diagnostic vehicle for providing the effectiveness of the teaching methods. Furthermore, it helps students to demonstrate that they are making progress in foreign language development, which can encourage their motivation to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and promote autonomy and independent learning skills. However, a teacher's role is not less significant in teaching process.

The article deals with an alternative personal-response assessment, which in conformity with the learner-centered principles of new methodological approaches treats assessment as an integral part of teaching in formative evaluation. Alternative assessment also promotes the climate of trust so that students that are affected by evaluation become involved in its process. They are prompted to communicate freely and are more able to engage in self-criticism and rethinking. Students' involvement in assessment assists them in achieving maturity and responsibility in making progress in language learning.

A new alternative method called self-assessment has been applied at the Centre of Foreign Languages, Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). Teachers strived to introduce a new method of assessment to students. The analysis is stressed on the obtained results that achievements in improving language skills must come from a student herself / himself.

Key words: assessment, self-assessment, language learning, achievements, teaching.

Introduction

The research grew out of a concern about what progress in developing language skills students make and how they evaluate their achievements themselves. The last two decades have witnessed a notable shift from structural teaching methods to communicative, humanistic and learner-centred approaches Self-assessment is needed to assist teachers in making decisions about students' achieved linguistic abilities. Therefore, self-assessment becomes a diagnostic tool that provides feedback to a learner and a teacher about suitability of the language course program and effectiveness of teaching methods.

> *"Assessment is defined as the process of gathering and integrating information whereas evaluation is the process of making a judgement of a performance based on criteria" (Puhl 1997).*

Students are expected to develop a sense of responsibility and initiative in self-assessment when studying the language. Motivation is the first, which matters the most. Students are often passive in their approach to learning, and become demotivated if they cannot see any clear progress. Involving students in the assessment and evaluation process as self-directed learners is an essential part of balanced assessment. Students need to examine their work and think about what they do well and in which areas they still need help. They can compare their work and create evaluation criteria for achieved results. Students learn the qualities of good work, how to judge their work and their own efforts of accomplishment in language learning and how to set personal goals. They develop the habit of self-reflection.

Within this context teachers are seen as helpers and organizers. The teacher's role is no longer limited to the traditional role of the transmitter of knowledge. Good teachers always encourage learners to think for themselves and take control of their own learning. The responsibility for promoting students' achievements in improving language learning belongs to the teacher. Language teachers are faced with the responsibility of deciding which testing methods are the most appropriate for language education. "Traditionally, the teacher is the one who knows all" (Reilly 2001).

Some language teachers at KTU are deliberately moving from traditional formal to informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation. Self-assessment essays used in the analysis is the main objective for teaching / testing and determining what and how students learn and evaluate the progress of their achievements in the process of foreign language learning.

Theoretical Background

With the changes in education the nature of testing has changed over the years to become less formal, more humanistic, formed in the mind not so much to catch people out on what they do not know, but a more neutral assessment of what they do (McNamara 2000). Recent the so-called "alternative assessment" has stressed the usefulness of a variety of innovative testing procedures including portfolios, self-assessment, conferencing, diaries etc. (Norris 2000). According to researchers McNamara (2000), and Shaaban (2001), new forms of language assessment may not involve the challenge of a test performance under time limits and support learners to master the language in an anxiety-reduced environment.

A student is seen as a centre in achieving quality in higher education when describing educational process as being of high quality (Barnett 1992). The Bologna Declaration (19/06/1999) emphasizes students as being competent, active

and constructive partners in the participating and influencing the content of education establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area (Kirsch 2002).

Current trends in English teaching put emphasis on self-assessment as one of the fundamental elements of self-directed language learning. There are several reasons for using student self-assessment. It promotes an attitude of inquiry in self-assessment that students have an active relationship to the material, consideration of the meaning and relevance of the tasks accomplished. It provides opportunities for students to demonstrate relationships between course material, combine quantitative and qualitative assessment of their learning. It encourages students to reflect on learning and teaches them to engage in a self-directed process (Baron 2004). It is the opportunity for learners to assess their own progress. Researcher Harris (1997) described the process of evaluation:

> *"Learners simultaneously create and undergo the evaluation procedure, judging their achievement in relation to themselves against their own personal criteria, in accordance with their own objectives and learning expectations".*

The *problem*: students do not perceive the significance and necessity of self-assessment in their achievements of foreign language learning. The *aim* is to prove that students' self-assessment essays can help students to be more active to judge their performance in developing their skills in the process of the language learning. It can benefit learners to locate their own strengths and weaknesses and get them to think about what they need to do in order to achieve progress. Moreover, the study analyses students' progress in the foreign language learning at KTU during the period of 2002/2003/2004 in the Faculties of Social Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Informatics and Design Technologies.

The research methods used by the authors are analysis of the scientific literature and the content analysis of students' self-assessment essays. The research is designed according to the qualitative research paradigm. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines "essay – a short piece of writing by a student as a part of a course of study" (Hornby 2000). A group of teachers of the Centre of the Foreign Languages at Kaunas University of Technology used self-assessment essays as a complement in judging students' progress.

Results and Discussion

The results of the students' self-assessment essays have been presented as a useful instrument for assisting students in focusing on their own performance. Students' self-assessment essays of achievements in English have been based on the program that comprises the textbooks *Cutting Edge Upper-Intermediate*, *English for Social Sciences* and *English Reader for Students of Mechanical Engineering*.

At the beginning of autumn term 2002, a student self-centered learning strategy was applied into the foreign language learning process to achieve progress in improving language abilities in writing, reading, speaking and listening. Students' self-assessment essays of achievements in English administered in the faculties of Social Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Design and Informatics in 2002 /

2003/2004, taking General English and technical English courses as compulsory subjects in the first year have been analyzed. Students were treated as intelligent adults who were highly motivated and the assessment of the subject by a mark at the end of the learning period could result in providing a scholarship or state funded place.

The analysis deals with the students' individual opinion and ideas about reflecting on their learning, measuring their knowledge in achieving good results of the academic English language. The students assessed their skills and abilities in reading, writing, speaking, listening in the process of the studies during class activities and done individually. The students' positive and negative opinions about the acquired language learning skills have been analyzed. During the term students did much reading and as they wrote they improved this skill. Reading has helped students not only in promoting language learning but also in nurturing emotional intelligence, which is one of the most important aspects in academic achievements. According to Ghosn (2001), emotional intelligence is a factor in the foreign language learning and has a positive outlook in academic achievements. Emotional intelligence includes the ability to maintain hope and optimistic outlook in the face of disappointment and difficulties.

Learning hard and preparing for discussion regularly, being active during the lectures students developed self-confidence during speaking activities and made significant achievements in pronunciation. Judging the results of the analysis they improved speaking skills with the help of preparing and presenting reports.

"Each work and task demanded responsibility. Listening to my classmates I could enrich my vocabulary and listening skills".

> *"Presentations are very important for assessment because they cover a wide range of meaningful activities and can provide a comprehensive record of student's abilities in both oral and written performance" (Shaaban 2001).*

The students' conferences were an effective informal way of assessing the students' progress in the language learning. They provided opportunities for interactions where the teacher learned about students' communicative abilities, emotional and social well-being.

> *"Recent trends in language teaching methodology have stressed the need to develop students' ability to work cooperatively with others in groups. Students can evaluate encouraging each member of their team emphasizing their positive contribution to team - work" (Shaaban 2001).*

"We had a lot of work to do. It wasn't difficult because our group members became good friends. When the atmosphere was good in a classroom, it was easier to study". "It was really interesting and useful for us to learn to work together in pairs and to share our opinions". "It was a great experience and a good way of learning to work in groups".

Extra material given by the lecturer, searched information on different topics, grammar, written essays, tests, reports, key words contain the students' portfolio, which was a part of learning. The purpose of a portfolio in the context of language learning is to demonstrate the extent of a student's communicative competence through samples. Portfolio traces a student's progress over time, it is imperative that revisions

and drafts would be included and all samples be dated (Shaaban 2001; Čižinauskienė 2003).

The students compared their work over time, created evaluation criteria for achievement in language learning, discussed their strategies for attending lectures, improved knowledge, analyzed mistakes and judged their progress in the developed language skills.

One of the most complicated tasks for the students was writing: wrong word order was the most frequent mistake along with confused tenses and wrong prepositions.

"This English module has given me quite a lot of skills and experience in learning English, in spite of the fact that I am still making mistakes in spoken and written English".

"Essay and report helped me to learn more about planning my written works".

Grammar tests were the most stressful activity for the students. They did not feel confident in their knowledge of grammar rules in applying them into practice. Another obstacle in reaching better results was time limit for tests.

"Students are required to produce grammatically correct basic sentences. Grammar section tests the recognition of a wide range of basic grammatical structures. Tests could lead to effective language skill building" (Niakaris 1997).

"Nevertheless, not everything was so interesting and joyful for me, grammar tests were the most difficult activity". "It is a pity but I can not be proud of my improvement in grammar skills".

Some students confessed being passive learners. They did not know how to evaluate themselves and their achievements in the language learning. The students were aware of the motivation in learning the foreign language, however, they did not demonstrate much enthusiasm and initiative in putting extra efforts to prepare for the lectures. The students were not as active as the teachers expected them to be.

"If I wanted to achieve good results in language learning, I should not miss my lectures. It was very important to me, because when I attended all lectures, I could enrich and improve my poor knowledge".

"I have been preparing for my English classes very carefully, so I think I have made a progress".

"English lectures are very important for us, because they give us an equal chance to gain an education, to develop individual skills and learn the responsibilities we will need in the future".

"I should write not only about learning progress and experience but also analyze my mistakes".

"I did not improve my English as well as I could. It was all because I did not prepare works in time, or did not do them at all. It was all the fault of my laziness".

"I know that I have studied not enough to develop my academic English".

At the beginning of the term the students were not used to self-assessment strategy, but at the end of the semester the learners were able to reflect and evaluate their own progress.

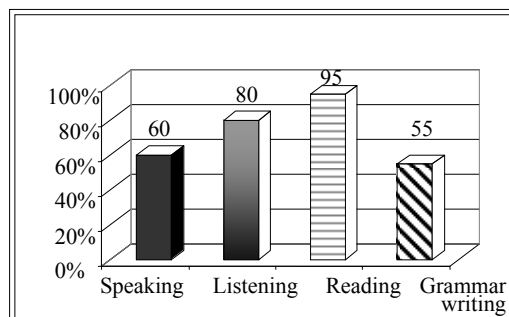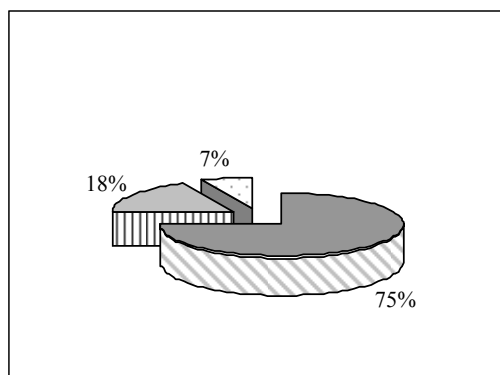**Chart 1.** The results of the students' self-assessment in developed skills

Chart 1 presents the students' assessed skills in developing speaking that make about 60%, for the learners have not been as active as they have been asked to. Listening skills make about 80%, as the majority of the students have perceived the listening material whereas others have had difficulties in understanding. Reading skills have been rated best – 95%. On the other hand, grammar and writing skills have been evaluated only about 55%. The students have had problems with reviewing grammar.

Chart 2. The students' judgment of their progress in the language learning.

Viewing the results of self-assessment of achievements in the language learning it has been affirmed that 75% of the students evaluated their skills positively; 18% of the students were passive learners who just aimed at passing the exam, and the rest 7% of the students regretted not having worked and not having done progress in the language learning.

Conclusions

The method of students' self-assessment in the foreign language learning is rewarding, meaningful and affective when perceived individually. Students' self-assessment is a practical tool in the university classroom. It promotes students' autonomy and independent learning skills, makes students more active in judging their own progress and encourages them to see the value of what they have learned. The method of alternative assessment assists the ultimate goal of evaluation to reflect upon, discuss, and judge the students' learning process. Positive outlook in the foreign language learning is also a factor in academic achievements.

The method of self-assessment can be integrated into daily classroom activities and give a comprehensive picture of students' abilities and achievements in foreign language learning.

Textbooks

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Kalbos mokymosi pasiekimai taikant studentų savarankiško vertinimo sistemą

Santrauka

Straipsnyje akcentuojamas metodas, kuriuo studentai įvertina savo pasiekimus bei trūkumus, mokantis užsienio kalbų šiuolaikiniame universitete. Savęs vertinimas tampa mokymo sudėtine dalimi. Jis padeda nustatyti studentų silpnąsias ir stipriąsias puses ir puoselėti savarankišką mokymąsi. Autorės mano, kad studentai turi žinoti apie naujus vertinimo metodus, kurie turi savo privalumų bei trūkumų. Studentams tai – naujovė. Dėstytojai naudoja savęs vertinimo metodą, kuris padeda tobulinti studentų gebėjimus patiems vertinti savo pasiekimus mokymosi procese. Studentų savo pasiekimų vertinimo metodas kalbos mokyme yra diagnostinė priemonė. Be to, savęs vertinimas parodo besimokantiems jų tobulėjimą, pasiekimus, mokantis užsienio kalbas, bei motyvuoja mokymąsi. Studentai skatinami aktyviai dalyvauti paskaitose, vertinti ne tik savo, bet ir savo draugų pasiekimus. Šis metodas suteikia realią galimybę pačiam suprasti bei taisyti savo klaidas.
Straipsnio autorės pateikia studentų, besimokančių anglų kalbos, savęs vertinimo metodo tyrimo analizę, atliktą Kauno technologijos universiteto Socialinių mokslų, Mechanikos, Dizaino ir technologijų ir Informatikos fakultetuose.

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