

Self-assessment and Oral Performance Ability: The Case of Japanese Learners

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The developing discourse which moves assessment away from a measurement model towards one of learner empowerment and the development of assessment for lifelong learning sets the context for this article. The aim was to investigate the effect of self-assessment on foreign language learners' oral performance ability. Twenty EFL students of foreign language institutes in Tokyo participated in the study. They were divided into an experimental group and a control group, based on the results of English oral performance pre- tests. The research instrument consisted of a self- assessment checklist containing subcategories related to the organization of the presentation, content, linguistic factors (vocabulary use, grammatical rules and pronunciation) and interaction with the audience. It was developed as a result of interviewing participants and their teachers and then adapting results based on the results of reviewing available checklists in the literature. The data were collected by the experimental group members' self- assessments of their 6 oral performances and the teacher's assessment of their performances. The obtained data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential methods. Results indicated that participating in self-assessment process had positive effect on learners' oral performance ability.

Keywords: *Self-assessment (SA), oral performance, foreign language institutes in Javanrood, Alternative assessment, Formative assessment*

1. Introduction

Research on language assessment is not new and many people have worked in this area. The job of this article is not to review all of them, but a good overview can be found in Karami and Salmani Nodoushan (2014) and Salmani Nodoushan (2006a, 2008a, 2009a, 2010a). One area of language assessment is self-assessment. Self-assessment (SA), as one type of alternative assessment, with the increased attention to learner-centered curricula, needs analysis, and learner autonomy has gained popularity in recent years and its potential value as an instructional tool to facilitate learning as well as a measurement tool has been a topic of much discussion (Blanche, 1988; Boud, 1995; Butler and Lee, 2010). The increasing interest in such methods has been driven by increasing recognition of the need to engage learners as active participants in the learning process and to equip them with the skills required to be effective life-long learners. (Wood, 2009)

Many people have argued that teachers should help students construct knowledge through active involvement in assessing their own learning performance, and that students are empowered by gaining ownership of their learning and life-long learning skills. Research on language pedagogy especially recommends that teachers should provide opportunities for students to assess their language level so as to help them focus on their own learning (Blanche, 1988; Blue, 1994; Dickinson, 1987; Harris, 1997; Henner-Stanchina & Holec, 1985; Oscarsson, 1989; Salmani Nodoushan, 2006b, 2007a,b,c, 2008b,c, 2011a, 2012).

In the educational system of Japan students learn English for 7 years in the formal educational systems. In addition, those learners who afford participating in private foreign language institutes or under the supervision of private tutors, spent more time on studying English. Despite the huge amount of time and budget dedicated to learning English some of the Japanese learners have difficulty with this subject area. The problems are more sever in oral proficiency skills of these learners of English as a foreign language.

In Japanese schools, especially in rural areas, students are assessed solely by instructors; this activity is intended to improve the students' performance. Learners are not given the chance to assess their own performance. In this regard Luoma and Tarnanen (2003: 440) have stated that:

SA is intended to help students understand the goals of tasks, reflect on what they have achieved with reference to such goals, and figure out what it will take to finally reach their goals. Despite the importance of SA, learners are rarely put in charge of rating their own performance.

Within this situation, as Taras (2001) argued, teachers are sending out the wrong message to students. They lead them to believe that the main focus of interest is the grade. After teachers' correction of their students' papers, the things they receive are marks, some question symbols and some ticks. Once students submit their work they typically become disengaged with the assessment process. Hence, opportunities for learning are lost as they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes.

This is true in the context of Asian countries, especially Japanese learners of English as a foreign language. That is the learning context has traditionally been focused on teacher centered instruction and measurement-driven assessments, and the environment is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness among students. Littlewoods (1999) observed in his studies that East Asian students expect the teacher, as the holder of authority and knowledge, to be responsible for the learning assessment. Thus, one may expect that SA might recently work well in Asian classrooms because, according to Stevenson and Stigler (1992), Asian societies recently tend to attribute educational success to effort rather than ability.

The current study is based on the assumption that, the use of self-assessment (SA) in second and foreign language teaching/learning has remained rather rare in Japan although it has been prevalent for a number of years in such fields as psychology, sociology, business, etc. in many other countries. Studies investigating the impact of students' SA on their performance in oral performance in English in Japan are rare. This study is one of the first studies dealing with the implementation of this technique, and maybe the first one done in oral proficiency domain in Japan. It should be emphasized that, while self-assessment has been promoted in various educational contexts, very little empirical examination has been under-taken on its instructional effectiveness in foreign language learning, especially oral performance area. One may also argue that the implementation of self-assessment can be challenging if the learning context, like the learning context of Japan, has traditionally been focused on teacher-centered instruction and measurement-driven assessments, or if the environment is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness among students. Hence; the present study aims to improve the understanding of learners' self-assessment by examining the effectiveness of self-assessment in oral performance domain in Japan.

The significance of the current study can be documented by the fact that the inconsistent findings of research on SA highlight the need for more research. A similar plea was also voiced by some scholars (e.g., Brantmeier, 2006; Oscarson, 1997; Ross, 1998), acknowledging the scarcity of research in the area of SA in foreign or second language context. Therefore, the present research is an attempt to provide empirical evidence concerning the use and consequences of SA. In other word, this research is an attempt to answer the following research question:

Research question #1: Does implementation of SA have any effect on learners' oral performance skill?

Research question #2: Is there any difference between the average of the pre- and post- test of control and experimental group?

2. Background of the Study

In a study of SA, Finch and Taeduck (2002) examined applying SA as a valuable additional means of improving oral abilities. They developed a test focusing on the improvement in spoken English of 1700 Freshman University learners over an academic year (64 hours). This was administered and evaluated using established oral-test criteria. They looked at improvement rather than level of achievement, and the conversation-English course taken by the learners was the basis of the test. Results showed that: (1) preparation for the test necessitated active spoken participation in lessons, (2) lessons tended to utilize task-based communicative teaching methods, and (3) the means became the end in that the test was not only a reason for developing oral skills but also a means of achieving that goal.

In the Asian context, Baniabdelrahman (2010) investigated the effect of Jordanian eleventh grade students' SA on their performance in reading in English. The participants of the study consisted of an

experimental group and a control group; (67 male and 69 female students). A reading test was developed and its validity and reliability were established. To collect data on the students' progress, student SA through one-minute papers and rating-scale sheets were used. The findings of the study revealed that student SA had positive effect on their performance in reading in English.

Ross (2006: 2) stated that "the benefits of SA are more likely to accrue when three conditions are met: teacher and learners negotiate SA criteria, teacher-student dialogue focuses on evidence for judgments, and SAs contribute to a grade". In addition, it could be assumed that probably the most difficult aspect of SA is to determine the criteria. Criteria are the base of evaluating learner progress; they identify the critical aspects of a performance or a product that describes in specific terms what is involved in meeting the learning outcomes. It is necessary for the concept that the criteria are presented in operational terms with which all participants are familiar. Criteria should include information about the area to be assessed, the aims to be pursued and the standards to be reached (Boud, 1995).

On the whole, the research evidence suggests that SA contributes to higher student achievement and improved behavior (Ross, 2006: 5). Hern and McMillan (2008) stated that, although in the current era of high-stakes accountability there is considerable pressure to focus only on student performance and to minimize the extent to which SA is taught, experienced, and encouraged, SA will help learners to achieve high scores on accountability tests.

It also gives learners the awareness of distinction between competence and performance (Blue, 1994; Salmani Nodoushan & Daftarifard, 201). Through SA, learners can realize that studying languages is different from other kinds of learning at their school or university, that the prime objective is performance in the language rather than knowledge about the language (Harris, 1997).

For the current study, it is assumed that if the results indicate the positive effect of SA on learners' performance and prove that their ability increases overtime, then it will shed some light on the importance and value of this technique in improving students' performance in oral proficiency in English. Thus, learners, teachers, policy makers, test developers and material developers will benefit from the results. It will also open up the doors of introducing new trends in assessment to teachers and learners.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in the study included English teachers and students. Students were 20 native Japanese speaking learners (both male and female), aged between 15- 19 years, from an English language institute in Tokyo, Japan; they exhibited various degrees of spoken proficiency in English. All of them had passed *Intro* and *New interchange 1 & 2* courses in their previous terms. Ten of them served as the experimental group and another ten as the members of the control group. They had participated in English classes to become capable of speaking English and to improve their oral proficiency skills.

The teachers were non- native speakers of English who have been working in foreign language institutes for more than five years. Three of them also had the experience of teaching in high schools for more than ten years. Four of them had academic degrees in TESOL and one of them had bachelor's degree in English translation.

3.2. Instrument

One of the flaws of the previous studies on SA was the fact that the scales used were not specified, or teachers used different criteria than learners (Boud & Falchikov, 1989). To alleviate this problem a specific checklist was designed and both teachers and learners used the same criterion for assessment process. It was developed by teachers and learners collaboratively and its design was based on the course objectives on oral performance.

When it became clear to the group that the researcher was not going to write the criteria for them, the learners of the experimental group were divided into three groups of their own preference and brainstormed ideas to identify the criteria. They were asked the question: "In your opinion, what factors are important to be considered in oral performance assessment?" For the sake of clarity, the question was delivered up to the learners in Japanese, which is the official language of Japan. At the

end of their discussion, they agreed on a set of criteria on which to base their assessments. The teachers were asked the same question in an interview. Their interviews were coded, and the set of criteria on which they agreed were recorded.

To increase the validity of the instrument, two actions were taken. Elements derived from interviews with teachers and those obtained from learners' brainstorming were compared and contrasted with the elements mentioned in other checklists and rating scales in the related literature. Then the checklist was delivered up to two TESOL specialists, and their suggestions for improvement were received. Finally, the learners' ability was assessed in four aspects of their oral performance ability: logical development of ideas (content), linguistic, paralinguistic, and pragmatic factors (based on a five point Likert scale). The language section contained three subcategories namely: vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. They gave themselves a 1 to 5 rating for each of the six categories. The total score for the six categories was a maximum 30.

3.3. Procedure

Students were chosen among a population of all male and female learners, who had passed the *Intro* and *New interchange 1 & 2* courses. The emphasis on passing these course books was because of the fact that, these sources have a part called SA activity. As learners had the experience of completing these courses, they somehow had familiarity with the concept of SA. Because of this, they might have less difficulty doing SA process compared with other learners.

The aims of the present research and the procedures, which were intended to be followed during the study, were described in detail for all the 50 learners. They were given the interval time of a week to talk with their families and think deeply and decided whether they wanted to participate in this research or not. At first, 5 learners eagerly accepted to take part in the study. After discussing the advantages of the SA process and describing its effects discussed in the literature, another 5 learners showed enthusiasm to take part in the process. This total number of 10 learners served as the members of the experimental group. This group included 8 females and 2 males. They were assured that their SA scores would not be used for determining final grades. They were also given the assurance that their video-taped performance would not be shown to anyone without their permission. Other learners' reasons for not accepting to participate was lack of time, being busy studying their school books, fear of not having qualities to do SA, and fear of their performance being video-taped.

For the other 40 students, it was explained to them that the research needs a control group. It was added that the members of the control group did not need to do anything special, except for participating in a pre-test and a post-test. Then, a test of oral performance was administered to this population. To guarantee the validity of the test, the items were selected from the book which was written by the authors of the learners' course books. Then it was delivered up to a specialist in TESOL, with a PhD degree and over ten years' experience of teaching English. The specialist examined the test and provided his comments and suggestions for modifications. His comments were met and relevant modifications were implemented. Before delivering up the questions to the participants, their teachers' ideas were also asked. They stated that they were good items which fitted learners' level and covering their text book content.

Participants were told that they only needed to choose one answer, and that they should choose the most appropriate one. They were asked to avoid any guessing. They were also told that, in correcting the papers, the negative mark would be considered for the wrong answers. Based on the results of this test, 16 learners whose level of proficiency seemed to be close to the proficiency level of the members of the experimental group were chosen.

In order to have a homogeneous experimental and control group, they were all, individually, interviewed on the following topic: "What are advantages and disadvantages of living in a big city?" These interviews were scored by the researcher and served as the pre-test of the study. Based on the results of the pre-test implementation, 10 students whose performance average perfectly matched the average of the experimental group's performance, were selected.

With the help of the manager of the institute, the members chosen for the experimental and control group, were placed in two classes. The teacher of both classes was chosen to be the same person. All

of the participants had familiarity with this teacher since they had passed courses with him during the past semesters. The rationale behind deciding to have both classes in an institute and the same teacher was to control the effect of teacher’s instruction and the effect of institute atmosphere on the learners’ performance. 20 learners and 5 English teachers participated in the study. It should be mentioned that four of the teachers only participated in the interview part, which aimed to construct the checklist.

The study was conducted within courses at one of the English language institutes in Tokyo, Japan, in 2012. The classes were meeting five hours per week during three semesters. During the first semester the participants were taught the course *Interchange 3* developed by Jack C. Richard, Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor in 2009. During the last two semesters, they were taught using the course *Headway 3* developed by Liz and John Soars in 2010. In both courses, each unit includes the introduction of a new grammatical point, a topic to be talked about and related vocabularies to help learners expand their oral presentation performance and a reading section.

Assessment process was integrated into the learning and teaching in the course. In addition to speaking tasks such as individual speech, class discussion learners were required to assess their own oral performances. It is worth mentioning that any other skills (including reading, writing and listening) that were also taught were in the service of improving oral performance of students.

Furthermore, the present study tried in every way to meet the ethical issues. The learners participating in the study were informed at the beginning of the study about the project, the steps which are intended to be followed and what are expected from them to do during the implementation of the study. The researcher also called the participants’ parents or talked with them in the institutes about the project and their permission was obtained.

In each video-taping session, participants were reminded that the files will not be shown to anyone without their permission. To make the process of SA as ethical as possible, attention was also paid to the participants’ affective states. Participants indicated that they were afraid of making themselves exposed to the teacher, and that they felt worried about the effect of their SAs on their final marks at the end of semester. To help learners’ feel relaxed during the process, they were given assurance that their SAs would not be shown to their teachers and that the results would not count as a part of their final check mark.

4. Data analysis

To investigate the results, the paired samples *t*-test was used to answer the question “is there any difference between the average of the pre- and post-test of control and experimental groups?” The results are depicted in the following tables:

Table 1
Paired Samples t-Test of Control Group’s Pre- and Post-Tests

	Pair difference		Significance level at 0.05% for interval of means		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Directional <i>P</i> .VALUE
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Low limit	High limit			
			pre- and post-tests	2.1			

Table 2
Paired Sampled t-Test for Experimental Group’s Pre- and Post-Tests

	Pair difference		Significance level at 0.05% for interval of means		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Directional <i>P</i> .VALUE
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Low limit	High limit			
			Pre- and post-tests	6.6			

Based on the results of the data in table 1 the null hypothesis that “there is no significant difference between average of the control group’s pre- and post- tests”, is rejected. Based on the results of the

data in table 2 the null hypothesis that “there is no significant difference between average of the experimental group’s pre- and post- tests” is rejected. If we compare the results of the averages of the pre- and post- tests for the control and experimental groups, it is evident that this amount is higher for the members of the experimental group. This leads us to the conclusion that, participating in SA process has effect on learners’ oral performance ability.

For further and more accurate investigation of this statement, like the case for the first null hypothesis, inferential analysis will be provided. Here, to compare the differences between the averages of pre- and post- tests of the experimental and control groups, the *t*-test formula will be used. The result of the analysis is depicted in table 3. As it is evident in both cases, when the variances are equivalent and when they are not, the amount of *p* value is less than 0.05. This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis “there is no relationship between learners’ participation in SA process and their level of oral performance ability”. Based on the results of the data presented in the tables 2 and 3 it could be concluded that participation in SA process has positive effect on the level of learners’ oral performance ability.

Table 3
Comparison of the Average Scores of Pre- and Post-Tests of Experimental and Control Group

	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Two way P.VALUE	Significance level at 0.05% for interval of means	
				Low limit	High limit
When the variances are equivalent	-4.569	18	0	2.43083	6.56917
When the variances are not equivalent	-4.569	11.517	.001	2.34409	6.65591

5. Discussion

The findings in the present study are specifically valuable in the Japanese context, with its long tradition of teacher-centered classes, as a step toward a more learner-centered educational system with more autonomous learners. Although for Japanese students it is difficult to be totally independent, working with their teachers in the process of assessment helps them move gradually toward independence.

Although, with the recent emphasis in Japan on standards, and due to the poor alignment of constructivist approaches and standards, it is very difficult to harmonize formative and summative assessments, but as Sluijsmans, Dochy and Moerkerke (1998) pointed out, these alternative forms of assessment should be a part of a process of change towards a student centered learning environment. This change requires a shift in emphasis from the norm-referenced to the criterion-referenced testing, from purely summative to formative and summative assessment, from external to internal evaluation, and from the assessment of product to the assessment of process as well. To take the most advantages of the process it should be combined with the summative aspect use of the process, that teachers’ formative work would not be undermined by summative pressures.

As the factors influencing any reform are in close interaction, they should be taken into account. In this regards different groups should take responsibility, some of them are mentioned below. Government is assumed to support the implementation of the policy. They are recommended to provide fund, expert personnel and other requirements in order to make the movement easier. They are also teacher training centers (TTC), as the main sources of training teachers, are recommended to take responsibility towards training teachers with the pragmatic ability to implement the new approaches such as self-assessment. It is strongly recommended that universities, as one of the major sources of education, take responsibility towards providing the learners and educators with the opportunity to get informed about the new trends in the era. It also seems wise and necessary to provide them the opportunity to practice such new methods and trends in their actual situations to benefit the maximum from its implementations.

Finally, the current research hopes that the study will be useful to those involved in the domain of language teaching to help students develop techniques for their own learning. There should be teachers' training sessions that give them the insight to trust the accuracy of learners' SA. The development of the field of TESOL in Japan provides the opportunity for more training for in-service teachers. This will make the introduction and training of new ideas such as SA easier.

6. Conclusion

Considering the small number and narrow range of the participants, the results presented in this study need to be interpreted with caution. In the future work, the use of broader range of participants is recommended. As far as SA is concerned, once again there is the need to bear in mind that the present study involved learners from an English class with very little experience in being autonomous learners. The task of SA was thus a novelty to them.

Another point which was needed to be investigated, but was not in this research, was the nature of the feedback (see Salmani Nodoushan 2009b, 2010) given to the participants. Also it was not possible to have two teachers as the raters of the participants' performances. The existence of two or more raters and computing inter reliability among the results of their assessments will provide more valid results about learners' performances.

Since the positive effects of SA on oral performance skill was found in this research, methods of teaching and material development in language classes should be designed in such a way that encourages its implementation. It is also suggested that the effect of SA on the learners' other language skills (reading, writing and listening) be investigated. Another line of research can be devoted to the investigation of the effect of the learners' personality traits (confidence, motivation, self-esteem, extroversion, introversion etc.) on their SAs (see Al Shalabi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2009; Nemati, Salmani Nodoushan & Ashrafzadeh, 2010; Salmani Nodoushan, 2002, 2003, 2006c, 2007d, 2011b). Gender differences and its effect on SA can be an interesting topic to be investigated, too (see Salmani Nodoushan, 2010b, 2013).

The importance of students' level of proficiency and its effect on SA, too, should be born in mind. It is wise to conduct research that compares the results of different groups of learners' SA with different levels of proficiency. Another point to bear in mind is the investigation of the effect of feedback on learners' SAs. And also investigation of what type of feedback is more suitable for the SA process implementation. As the concept of self- and peer- assessment seems to have the same theoretical background and the same purpose, the present researchers suggest the co- implementation of these processes in language learning context. It will also be beneficial to compare the amount of their effects on learners' ability, to introduce learners with the methods which benefit them the best.

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