

# The Role of Peer-assessment versus Self-assessment in Promoting Autonomy in Language Use: A Case of EFL Learners

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## Abstract

Students' assessment has numerous benefits like engaging students with their learning, and making them aware of their weaknesses. This study attempts to investigate the role of self-assessment and peer-assessment in promoting autonomy in language use with a focus on speaking skill. To carry out the research 48 EFL Iranian learners with the similar level of proficiency were chosen among 110 learners, and were put into two groups: experimental (n=24) and control (n=24). Then, they were given a pre-test on learner autonomy, and a pre-test for their speaking ability. In experimental group, the teacher provided the learners a series of activities through which they were asked to evaluate their peers' language during 12 sessions. In the control group, without any change in their common teaching and learning process, the students were required to assess their own language. Finally, both groups of students were asked to take the same tests as post-test. The results of data analysis showed that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the positive effect of peer-assessment on learners' autonomy. Furthermore, the results of analysis of data from speaking test indicated that there is a significant difference between experimental and control group. It can be concluded that peer-assessment has more significant effect on EFL learners' autonomy and speaking skill than self-assessment.

**Keywords:** *Learners' autonomy, Self-assessment, Peer-assessment, EFL*

## 1. Introduction

Many EFL teachers believe that assessment is a crucial element to develop the students' ability to evaluate their own performance leading to its improvement. Some scholars believe that assessment is the engine which drives the students' learning (John Cowan, 2005). Well-designed assessment can encourage active learning especially when the assessment delivery is innovative

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and engaging. Peer and self- assessment can foster a number of skills, such as reflection, critical thinking and self-awareness as well as giving learners some insights into assessment process.

Peer and self-assessment, where students assess each other and themselves, can encourage them to take greater responsibility for their learning, for example, by encouraging engagement with assessment criteria and reflection of their own performance and that of their peers. According to Topping (1998), peer-assessment is an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, worth, and quality of success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status. According to Henner-Stanchina and Holec (1985), self-assessment is an assessment technique that refers to the process whereby “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 curriculum developers and syllabus designers in general and course designers and university professors in particular may feel the need to pay more attention to students’ needs and styles in order to promote autonomy in language use in speaking classes. Therefore, this makes the research in this area necessary to be carried out.

Therefore, in order to know whether there is a relationship between self-assessment versus peer-assessment and learner’s autonomy, the present research was aimed to find out whether self and peer assessment leave any different cause in promoting autonomy in speaking classes.

## **2. Review of Literature**

In this part, the researcher will present the literature relevant to the study. First, the concept of autonomy will be defined and described. After that, some information about self- assessment and peer-assessment will be presented. At the end, the role of self and peer assessment in promoting autonomy in speaking classes will be discussed.

### *2.1. Autonomy*

Since politics and economics play an important role in decision-making mechanisms in people’s daily lives, the field of language learning and teaching is directed to change itself according to these criteria. Therefore, as Gremmo and Riley(1995) put it, the first interest in the concept of autonomy in language education is a response to ideals and prospects which come out as a result of political tumult in Europe in 1960s (as cited in Benson,2001, p.7). Within the area of self-directed learning, autonomy made its way as “the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning” as in the highly popular definition of Holec’s (1981, as cited in Lee, 1998, p.3). It was also regarded as an accepted product of practice of self-directed learning, or it is a kind of learning where the objectives, progress and evaluation are monitored by the learners themselves. In Trebbi's (1996) points of view, this definition of “taking charge of one’s own learning” is nothing but “a tatology as no learning takes place unless the learner is in charge: it is a prerequisite of learning” (cited in Fenner, 2000,p.79). Similar to the definition of Holec (1981), Pemberton (1996) defines the term self-directed learning as “the techniques used in order to

direct one's own learning" (cited in Lee, 1998, p.3). Some scholars believed that we can use the terms autonomy and self-direction interchangeably.

Pemberton and Holec's definition about autonomy are the same which means that the word autonomy is a capacity, while self-directed learning is a way of organizing learning (cited in Lee, 1998, p.3).

However, the word "capacity" and its definition need further explanation at this point. As Holec (1981) puts it there is "a dual emphasis on the ability to carry out autonomy learning and on the learning structures that allow the possibility of developing and exercising that ability" (cited in Benson 1996, p.29). This shows that the most important point here is the ability and possibility. As suggested, the capacity and readiness of the learners to undertake such responsibility is not innate and also this is not something which should be gained through formal learning environments (Holec, 1981, cited in Chan, 2001, p. 506).

Autonomy is a term which is difficult to come to an agreement among scholars even in the field of language learning and teaching. It means that teachers should motivate the learners to develop the ability of learning independently. This will help the learners not only in their educational life in formal setting, but also in their life where they have to learn and decide at each and every second.

## 2.2. *Self-assessment*

Self-assessment requires students to reflect on their own work and judge how well they have performed in relation to the assessment criteria. In other words, it provides some opportunities to be able to identify what constitutes a good piece of work (Bound, 1995).

In order to self-assess effectively, students must have an understanding of the criteria that they gauge their performance against in order to be able to evaluate what makes a piece of work good or poor. This internalizing encourages them for deep learning rather than surface learning and greater autonomy (Brown, Rust, & Gibbs, 1994). It can also help to engage them with feedback from you and your colleagues (Black, & William, 2001).

Self-assessment is an attractive alternative to traditional forms of assessment for the classroom teacher. It is a kind of metacognitive strategy which deserves special attention. Also, it helps students develop the characteristics of the "good language learner, which involves the ability to assess their own performance and the ability to be self-critical" (Hedge, 2000, p.94). It also helps learners develop students' independent learning skills through "greater emphasis on encouraging learners to determine their own objectives and to monitor their progress" (Brindly, 1989, p.59). Those who use self-assessment argue that total reliance on teacher assessment results in students not assuming any responsibility for their own learning, and also it encourages dependency on the teacher.

There are some advantages and disadvantages for using self-assessment (Michelle Schwartz, 1989). Some of the advantages that have been considered for self-assessment are as: it encourages student involvement and responsibility; encourages students to reflect on their role and contribution to the process of the group work; it allows students to see and reflect on their peers' assessment of their contribution; it focuses on the development of students' judgment skills. Some of the disadvantages would be as: self-evaluation has a risk of being perceived as a

process of presenting inflated grades and being unreliable; and students feel ill equipped to undertake the assessment.

### 2.3. Peer-assessment

Peer-assessment is viewed as another way of challenging students' dependence on the teacher for feedback and guidance in their language learning. It emphasizes learner autonomy and co-operation. It is based on the assumption that students can learn as much from each other as they can from the teacher. It shows many of the other advantages of self-assessment as well. However, peer-assessment can be more difficult to implement than self-assessment. For example, Sengupta (1998) evaluated a peer evaluation initiative in a secondary school writing classes in Hong Kong. On the other hand, many teachers have noticed that most students find it easier to spot errors in other people's work than in their own. Because of this, peer-assessment can be a helpful stepping-stone to self-assessment.

The present research investigated the role of two types of assessment namely, self and peer in promoting autonomy in language use. The promotion of independent learning is central to the whole enterprise of higher education because the intellectual powers which it seeks to foster cannot be exercised except in an independent mode. Critical thinking, judgment, creativeness, initiative, interpretative skills, hypothesis formulation and problem-solving capacities can only be made manifested by someone who is operating independently.

In the process of peer-assessment, students individually assess each other's contribution using a predetermined list of criteria. Grading is based on a predetermined process, but most commonly it is an average of the marks given by members of the group.

Like self-assessment, peer-assessment has also some advantages and disadvantages. Some of the stated disadvantages are as it encourages student involvement and responsibility; encourages students to reflect on their role and contribution to the process of group work; focuses on the development of student's judgment skills; and provides more relevant feedback to students as it is generated by their peers. The disadvantages pinpointed are as: students will have a tendency to award everyone the same mark; students feel ill equipped to undertake the assessment; and students may be reluctant to make judgments regarding their peers.

## 3. Research questions and hypotheses

To achieve the goals of the present study, the following research questions were posed:

*Q.1. Do peer-assessment and self-assessment have any significant different effect on EFL learners' autonomy level?*

*Q.2. Do peer-assessment and self-assessment have any significant different effect on EFL learners' speaking skill?*

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research question, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

*H0.1. Peer-assessment and self-assessment do not have any significant different effect on EFL learners' autonomy.*

*H0.2. Peer-assessment and self-assessment do not have any significant different effect on EFL learners' speaking skill.*

#### **4. Methodology**

##### *4.1. Participants and setting*

This study involved 48 students of language institutes in Birjand, Iran. These participants were chosen among 110 students based on their score in Oxford Quick Placement Test (2003). Then, they were divided into two groups, one experimental group (applying peer-assessment) and one control group (applying self-assessment). The participants in both groups were male to reduce the effect of gender as a kind of intervening variable.

##### *4.2. Instrumentation*

In this study, two different instruments were used for collecting the necessary data. The first one is a questionnaire on autonomy which is valid and reliable. It was taken from an article on the investigation of learner autonomy and strategies for coping with speaking problems in relation to success in English speaking classes (Burcu Gokgoz, 2008). It includes two parts, one part has 11 items through Likert scale, and the other has 10 items with multiple-choice. The second one is a speaking test based on IELTS. Both autonomy and speaking tests were used at the beginning and at the end. SPSS software and Microsoft Excel were used for analyzing the data.

##### *4.3. Procedure*

In this study, the classes were randomly assigned into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. At the beginning of the term, all the groups had a pre-test which measured the students' autonomy. Then, in the self and peer-assessment groups, the students were trained on how to assess themselves as well as their peers, respectively. The assignments used in classes were mostly based on IELTS speaking test which involved them in activities such as talking about their cultures, hometown, family, age, and their favorite hobbies. While in the peer-assessment group (experimental group), the students were required to listen to their peers, take notes and comment on their speaking, in the self-assessment group (control group), they were instructed to record their own speaking, transcribe it and comment on it. After the treatment period, the students in both groups were given a similar version of speaking test as a post-test, and also they were given the same autonomy questionnaire as a post-test.

#### **5. Results and Discussion**

One sample independent T-test was run to explore the differences between two groups on the pre-test which was based on learners' autonomy. The purpose of this analysis was to estimate the participants' autonomy level before the study began. Table 1 shows the results for this analysis.

*Table 1. Results of Independent t-test analysis for autonomy level (pretest)*

Groups	N	M	SD	t	df	P
Exp.	24	67.50	8.53	1.47	46	.02
Cont.	24	66.67	11.83			

As the results in Table 1 show, there is no statistically significant difference [ $t(46) = 1.47, p = .02$ ] between experimental ( $M = 67.50, SD = 8.53$ ) and control ( $M = 66.67, SD = 11.83$ ) groups with regard to autonomy which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of study treatment, the participants' autonomy level was assessed in posttest the result of which was compared with the data from pre-test through t-test analysis.

Table two shows the results for this analysis.

*Table 2. Results of Independent t-test analysis for autonomy level (posttest)*

Groups	N	M	SD	T	df	P
Exp.	24	75.41	8.74	2.68	46	.00
Cont.	24	70.33	7.77			

As the results of Table 2 show, there is a statistically significant difference [ $t(46) = 2.68, p = .00$ ] between experimental ( $M = 75.41, SD = 8.74$ ) and control ( $M = 70.33, SD = 7.77$ ) group. This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group with peer-assessment procedure outperformed those in control group with self-assessment. Therefore, the first null hypothesis stating that 'Peer-assessment does not have more significant effect on EFL learners' autonomy level than self-assessment' is rejected. In other words, peer-assessment has more significant effect on EFL learners' autonomy level than self-assessment.

Also, analysis of the results of measuring speaking ability of the participants in the pretest is presented in Table 3.

*Table 3. Results of Independent t-test analysis for speaking ability (pretest)*

Groups	N	M	SD	t	df	P
Exp.	24	75.71	8.94	0.71	46	.03
Cont.	24	75.13	9.92			

As the results of Table 3 show, there is no statistically significant difference [ $t(46) = .71, p = .03$ ] between experimental ( $M = 75.71, SD = 8.94$ ) and control ( $M = 75.13, SD = 9.92$ ) groups with regard to speaking skill which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of study treatment (peer-assessment), the participants' speaking skill was assessed in posttest via t-test analysis. Table 4 shows the results for this analysis.

Table 4. Results of Independent t-test analysis for speaking ability (posttest)

Groups	N	M	SD	T	df	P
Exp.	24	86.00	4.75	1.32	46	.01
Cont.	24	78.00	6.52			

As Table 2 shows, there is a statistically significant difference [ $t(46) = 1.32, p = .01$ ] between experimental ( $M = 86.00, SD = 4.75$ ) and control ( $M = 78.00, SD = 6.52$ ) group. This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of peer-assessment. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that 'peer-assessment does not have more significant effect on EFL learners' speaking skill than self-assessment' is rejected. In other words, peer-assessment has more significant effect on EFL learners' speaking skill than self-assessment.

One practice which has been considered to promote learning while assessing the language ability of the learners is educational assessment which could be realized through self-assessment and peer-assessment. Besides, there are some arguments for the advantages of self- and peer-assessment in the literature (e.g. Blanche, 1988; Oscarson, 1989). In general, there is not much trust in the capability of learners to assess their own language ability and that of others (Oscarson, 1989; Patri, 2002). Inaccuracy exists in every measurement, especially in the field of human sciences; however, one cannot ignore the fact that the accuracy of rating can improve if there is enough training and practice. This issue holds true in the case of expert raters; however, it does not mean that learners cannot be good raters if they are provided with enough training and practice. Even some empirical evidence from the literature supports this issue (Huttonen, 1986, as cited in Oscarson, 1989).

To support the findings of the present study it can be stated that early indications show that students who perceived benefits of peer-assessment enjoyed the sessions and got a greater understanding of the assessment. In situations of self and peer-assessment, learners are usually in a position to learn more than from the situations of tutor-marked work. They learn from their engagement in assessing and frequently from oral, in addition to written feedback. However, the tutor should monitor the feedback and, where appropriate elaborate it to ensure that students receive fair and equal treatment. Although the assessment criteria may be developed by the tutor, but greater value is gained when the students are involved in developing the criteria themselves. In peer-assessment the students are engaged in the group and can show the qualities of leadership.

On the other hand, the results of the present study did not support the effect of self-assessment on autonomy and speaking skill. Likewise, some studies showed that in the self-assessment, the students did not take the assessment seriously (Butler & Lee, 2010; Dann, 2002) and this might have led to their surface-level study. Sometimes the lack of feedback in the self-

assessment group compared to peer-assessment group limited the effectiveness of self-assessment (Butler & Lee, 2010; Black & William, 1998).

Further support on the findings of the present study can be provided by what is reported in the literature. The presence of some competitive environment among the students in peer-assessment and their willingness to assess their peer's achievement as exactly as possible might have led them to have more in-depth study and to be strict both in item construction and designing measurement criteria, two elements that affect the efficiency of an assessment practice (Blanche & Merino, 1998; Oscarson, 1997; Ross, 1998). Also, when self-assessment is compared with peer-assessment in terms of their effect on students' course achievement scores, it is the peer-assessment that proves to be more influential. Chang, Tseng & Lou (2012), and Sadler & Good (2006) reported that peer-raters are stricter than self-raters. It was revealed that peer-based scores were lower than self-based scores, which may mean that peer-raters tend to under-grade while self-raters tend to over-grade.

## 6. Conclusions

There might be a lot of factors effective in achieving learner autonomy. One of them might be assessment. The learners take an active role in the assessment process with self- and peer-assessment, which both play an important part in promoting autonomy in language use.

Self-and peer-assessment promote lifelong learning by helping learners to evaluate their own and their peer's achievements realistically. The use of peer-assessment encourages the students to believe they are part of a community of scholarship, because in this kind of assessment we invite the students to participate in a key aspect of higher education and they also make critical judgment on the work of others.

An important role for self- and peer-assessment is providing additional feedback from peers while allowing teachers to assess individual students less, but better. This makes a kind of movement from assessing quantity of student work to assessing quality, and also the higher order thinking skills.

The research shows that there is a need to use self-and peer-assessment in the problem-based learning content. The findings of the present study show that the role of self-versus peer-assessment in promoting autonomy in language use especially in speaking classes, is evident. But as the results demonstrate, peer-assessment has a stronger significant effect in promoting autonomy of language learners. It means that students can learn more from each other than they can from their own judgment. It is concluded that most students find it easier to spot errors in other people's work than in their own.

### 6.1. Pedagogical implications

The results of the present study have some pedagogical implications due to the effectiveness the both self-versus peer-assessment in promoting autonomy in language use especially in speaking classes, however, peer-assessment showed a stronger effect. Teachers can get the idea of training their students in a way that they can have self-assessment on their own learning and obtained language skills. They may develop autonomy in learning which is among the most significant



skills they are expected to receive from universities and institutes. Students can benefit from assessing themselves as well as their classmates, since the requirement to any kind of assessment is assessor's own deep understanding of the point under study.

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