

Developing self-assessment through journal writing

Wilaksana Srimavin and Pornapit Darasawang

Introduction

Self-assessment is a key issue in autonomous learning as it enables learners to set goals and to monitor and evaluate their own learning. Because of the importance of self-assessment, a whole course is devoted to the issue on the MA program in Resource Based Learning (RBL) at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. This course aims to prepare participants to manage self-access and other forms of autonomous learning. The course aims to provide both a theoretical and practical background in self-assessment and is conducted partly through experiential learning whereby participants engage in self-assessment to learn about the issues more deeply. One form of experiential self-assessment on the course involves writing journals to reflect on learning and to promote metacognition. To facilitate journal writing, guidelines are given suggesting that participants should consider what was learnt, problems encountered and their causes and how the problems were solved. This paper is a report on a small-scale investigation of the journals of four of the participants. It was found that participants tried to follow the guidelines in writing their journals but that there was little evidence of either deep reflection or self-assessment in the journals.

The MA program in Resource Based English Language Learning has been specifically developed in response to the country's growing need for language educators who can effectively promote independent learning. This program is based on the belief that successful language learning results when learners are independent, and are aware of and actively engaged in the process of learning, in other words, when they are more autonomous in their learning. Therefore, the program aims to teach the theory of independent learning, enabling participants to provide resources for learning such as self-access centres and to offer learner training.

Self-assessment in RBL is one of the courses in the RBL program. This course is intended to complement the course Materials Design for RBL because self-assessment is one element of designing self-access materials. The course aims to help the MA participants gain both a theoretical background and a practical background in self-assessment, so that they can select self-assessment techniques and instruments appropriate to the needs of specific learning situations and train learners in using self-assessment. The course is conducted partly through experiential learning whereby participants engage in self-assessment in order to learn about the issue more deeply.

This small-scale research was conducted with four MA participants. It aimed to investigate if journal writing enabled MA participants to develop self-assessment. Journal writing is one of the self-assessment instruments introduced in class.

Self-assessment

Assessment is regarded as a process of collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information in order to make decisions on student performance. In class, assessment can be conducted to diagnose student problems, to judge their academic performance, to provide feedback to students and to plan instruction (Airasian 1994).

Self-assessment is used by learners to evaluate and monitor their own level of knowledge, performance and understanding and to get information about their learning (Cariaga-Lo, Richards and Frye 1992, Dickinson 1987). Therefore, self-assessment is what the students see from their own perspectives (Oscarson 1989). Enabling students to self-monitor their learning practice is regarded as a way to help students develop knowledge through conscious control over that knowledge or to develop metacognitive awareness of knowledge and thought (Vygotsky 1962 cited in Wray 1994).

Although self-assessment is regarded as unreliable in formal education (Blue 1988, Janssen-van Dieten 1989), many educators advocate self-assessment as a tool to involve students in their learning (Oscarson 1989, Gardner and Miller 1999, Baldwin 2000). Oscarson (1989) thinks that self-assessment can promote learning because it gives learners training in evaluation which is important for autonomous learning. Learners need to be able to make reliable and valid judgements. Being asked questions on what and how they have learnt fosters evaluative attitudes in the learners and improves goal-orientation because the learners are aware of variability of language learning objectives and they are in control of their own learning situation. Therefore, Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest the use of

self-assessment in self-access learning because it enables the learners to reflect on their progress. This reflection enables the learners to take more control of their learning and to be responsible.

Reflection and self-assessment

Reflection or reflective thinking is a kind of mental activity which happens under the operation of motivational forces (Wildman, Niles Magliaro and McLaughlin 1990 cited in Mok 1994). In the educational context, reflection is regarded as a way of thinking about educational matters that involves the ability to make rational choices and assume responsibility for those choices (Ross 1990:22 cited in Mok 1994:95). Korthagen (1993) thinks that reflection in teaching or reflective teaching involves teachers using their beliefs about teaching and learning to analyse the situation critically and therefore they will take more responsibility for their own actions in class. In order to develop reflective teaching, teachers or trainee teachers should have opportunities to use conscious reflection in order to understand the relationship between their own thoughts and actions (Farrell 2001).

Since reflection is regarded as one of the important elements in teacher education, many educators agree that some form of reflection should be practised among teachers because reflective teaching, which is an enquiry-oriented habit, helps the teachers to become adaptive and to engage in self-monitoring (Tom 1985 cited in Mok 1994, Farrell 2001). Reflection and self-assessment are associated in that self-assessment is a useful tool to help students reflect on their practice and understand that learning is a process, not just an event that happens and finishes (Schön 1983, Gould and Taylor 1996 cited in Baldwin 2000).

Suggested methods to enhance reflection include journal writing, classroom observation and group discussion (Ho and Richards 1993, Richards and Lockhart, 1994, McDonough 1994, James 1996). However, writing is suggested as the best means to observe and collect evidence to help in the reflection process (Bartlett 1900). Therefore, journal writing was used in the study.

Journal writing

Journal writing has been used for different purposes. For example, trainee teachers use journals to reflect on the teaching/learning process and practising teachers write journals for inservice self-evaluation (Bailey 1990). To develop reflective teaching, teachers and trainee teachers need to collect evidence about their teaching. Keeping a journal is thus used as a means to enable the teachers and the trainee teachers to raise consciousness of their teaching, which is regarded as the first stage of reflective teaching. This involves mapping their ideas about teaching and about the teachers themselves, about the content of teaching and about people influencing their teaching (Bartlett 1990). With regard to self-assessment, journals can be used to help learners systematically collect data on their learning (Oscarson 1989). Students may write about their learning goals, reflections on their learning or their learning development.

The study context

Four MA participants (one male - Subject A and three females – Subjects B, C and D) undertook the course Self-assessment in RBL for four hours per week for 15 weeks in the second semester of the MA program. Each class was of two hours duration. The teaching in this course was discussion-oriented and based on the assigned reading and experiences of the participants as learners and teachers. The objectives of the course were to enable the participants to understand, know how to use, evaluate and select self-assessment instruments. Therefore, having the participants use self-assessment instruments themselves was considered essential to develop this knowledge. Journal writing, one of the self-assessment techniques, was selected because it is a simple technique. The participants already knew the process of journal writing because in the first semester they had to do journal writing for the whole semester in order to develop their reflective and writing skills. The data from the journals were analysed to answer the research question: How does journal writing enable the MA students to develop their ability to self-assess?

Method

The participants were asked after the second week of the course to write a journal in English at the end of each class and to hand in their journals every week. Each participant wrote a total of 15 entries. The tutor who was also one of the researchers told the participants that the purpose of the journal writing was to see if they could use journal writing to assess their learning. They were asked to reflect on the course content. From the tutor's perspective, knowing if the participants understood what she was

teaching was essential because she was concerned that the content of the course was new for the participants. To help the participants reflect on the areas which activated their self-monitoring ability, the tutor asked them to answer the following questions as a guide to writing their journals:

- What and how much have you learned in this session?
- What helps you to learn successfully in this session?
- What are your problems of learning in this session and what are the cause(s) of the problem(s)?
- How will you solve the problem(s)?
- What will you do in the future?

The tutor/researcher read the journals in order to see if the participants understood what she was teaching and to adjust the lessons to suit participant needs. She did not react verbally or in written form to any journal. The journal was used as a research instrument to investigate the development of participant ability to self-assess and a tool for the participants to communicate with the tutor.

Analysis

Content analysis was used in the data analysis by looking at how the subjects responded to the questions given as guidelines. In doing this, salient themes were drawn from the journals and frequently mentioned themes were identified. To analyse the content of the journals, one of the researchers, who was also the tutor on the course, read the journals and looked for key ideas in each area on which the participants reflected. This reflection was the self-assessment on their learning. The other researcher acted as an inter-rater and read the journals to see if she agreed with the key ideas identified by the first researcher.

Findings

Data from the journal entries shows that the MA participants assessed their learning by reporting on the content covered in class as seen from the following extracts.

- *Today I have learned some essential vocabulary that related to self-assessment in RBL.*
(Subject A Journal 3)
- *I got a lot of ideas of how to help students assess themselves from participants' ideas and with the guide of the teacher.* (Subject B Journal 3)
- *Today the teacher taught me about the meaning of some technical terms that concern this course.* (Subject C Journal 1)
- *The teacher wanted us to realise about the preparation that we should concern in both methodological and psychological preparation when we would like to present and set up the 'self-assessment' to our institute. She also urged us to view things in all different ways that would make us to notice and see more problems that could happen when doing things.* (Subject D Journal 3)

They also assessed their performance in order to answer the questions:

- How much have you learned in this session?
- What helps you to learn successfully in this session?
- *Even though I have read the articles written by Janssen-van Dieten and Bachman and Palmer many times, I still did not understand them especially the former. When the teacher explained it, I understand more.* (Subject A Journal 5)
- *I learn much more when friends report and the teacher asks questions and summarise at the end.* (Subject B Journal 8)

- *Everything in class today was better. I could understand the question that the teacher asked and I could understand the lesson more when she explained. (Subject C Journal 8)*
- *Today I understood the lesson because I had prepared before and the teacher gave me more information about the topic. (Subject C Journal 2)*
- *I felt that I had more understanding when the teacher asked about the details. She specified the point that I did not think about and then I had to think more deeply. (Subject D Journal 7)*

From these entries, it can be seen that the MA participants referred to the teacher as the main assistance for their success. A potential reason might be because the guided questions were imposed by the teacher.

With regard to their ability to identify problems and solutions, the MA students were able to identify them but their problems seemed to be facile such as laziness, not remembering what they read without note-taking, not being able to answer the questions or not understanding the passage because of its difficulty. Their solutions were also simple and straightforward as shown in the extracts below.

- *I found that I could not remember what I read if I did not take notes. Therefore, I decided to take note every time I read texts. (Subject A, Journal 2)*
- *I, before class assess myself that I understand the content quite well. However, when I was asked, I found out that I could not find the answer as quickly and correctly as I expected I should. From this, I am assured that I cannot learn well when time is limited (when I have to find the answer hurriedly). Besides, I discover myself that I need questions before attending classes. (Subject B Journal 5)*
- *Because of the difficulty of the passage, I think that if I don't really understand it, it's hard to discuss the passage. Therefore, I have to understand the passage as much as I can in order to get some ideas of the topic that can help me to link what I have read to what the class are discussing. (Subject C, Journal 3)*
- *After I could specify the problem, I prepare the lesson by reading the text and trying to make it easy to understand by drawing the mind map and taking notes or summarising each paragraph. (Subject C Journal 4)*
- *I know what are my weak points of learning such as my laziness. Therefore, I have planned about my schedule when I would read and review things that I have learned. (Subject D Journal 12)*

It can be seen that the MA participants tried to answer the questions given as a guideline. However, their answers did not really show deep reflection. In class, the participants were introduced to the idea that self-assessment enabled them to set goals in learning. Nevertheless, they were not able to use journal writing to set their goals after they knew their problems. Rather, they used journal writing simply to answer the questions asked by the tutor.

What the researcher/tutor gained from the journals was the reassurance that the students understood the content of the course because they explained what they had learned. This was a by-product of this study but it did show that the participants regarded the journal only as a tool to communicate with their teacher. What seemed to be missing was a realization about the benefits of a journal as a tool for self-assessment, even though they were expected to use it to assess their learning.

One of the reasons why reflection was not deep might be because there was no reaction to the journal from the tutor. Therefore, the participants kept answering the same guideline questions from the first

entry to the last. In other words, the learners might have treated the journal writing as an exercise where they answered questions, and not as an opportunity to assess their own learning. Therefore, they did not develop any deeper thoughts about their learning. In this context, guiding questions seemed to help the process of journal writing at the beginning but it obstructed the reflection process as the participants proceeded further.

With respect to metacognition, the MA participants were forced to use metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluating in their learning. Their journal entries showed that they exercised these strategies but it cannot be claimed that the self-assessment through journal writing developed metacognition.

Conclusion and recommendations

Journal writing is perhaps the easiest tool to use for self-assessment. However, the findings from this study reveal problems in using journals to develop self-assessment, although it was used by those who were supposed to know the rationale of using journal writing for self-assessment. The findings show that depth in self-assessment did not develop. This might be because there was no reaction from the tutor/researcher to what was written in the journals and the subjects treated the journal as an exercise where they answered the guiding questions rather than a place to assess their own learning. On reflection the guided questions seemed to have obstructed the reflection process and the subjects did not realise the benefits of a journal as a tool for self-assessment.

The findings suggest the following recommendations for using journals as a self-assessment tool:

- Support from teachers, by means of guided questions, should be provided at the initial stage of journal writing, if the learners are not used to reflecting on their learning or assessing their own learning. However, students should be asked to move away from the questions gradually or the teachers could change the questions.
- Negotiation between the teacher and the learners on what is to be assessed could help the learners perceive what is required.
- Bartlett (1990) suggests using *what* and *why* questions develop critical reflection. In this study, the researchers used *what* questions to guide the subjects but these questions needed only straightforward answers and not critical answers eg: *What have you learned in this session?* Therefore, the teacher should be careful when providing *what* questions to guide the learners and should include *why* questions to help learners to reflect more deeply.
- Reactions from the teacher, who is the audience of the journal, are necessary because they help the learners to think further and to improve the depth of reflection. Reactions can be provided by means of written responses in the journals, discussions in class or consultations with the journal writers.
- When using journal writing in teaching, the teacher should have a clear purpose because this purpose underpins any guided questions. In this study, the tutor/researcher was concerned whether the subjects understood the content. Therefore, the guided questions involved the assessment of students on their learning and focused on the content learned, not the application of the theory learned.

This study showed an attempt to develop student self-assessment through reflection in journal writing. However, the restrictions of the guided questions and the lack of reaction to the journals from the teacher obstructed the reflection process and thus reduced the potential benefits of self-assessment.

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About the Authors

Wilaksana Srimavin is a lecturer at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), Thailand. Although her main interest is teaching methodology, she is also involved in many projects concerning learner autonomy development. She is now teaching in the MA programme in Resourced-Based Learning.

Email: wilaksana.sri@kmutt.ac.th

Dr. Pornapit Darasawang is also a lecturer at KMUTT. She has been actively involved in encouraging learner autonomy in Thailand; being a part of the team to set up the self-access centre at KMUTT, conducting training courses for Thai teachers from a number of institutions in self-access learning, self-access materials preparation and setting up self-access centres.

Email: pornapit.dar@kmutt.ac.th