

Supporting Chinese learners of English to implement self-assessment in L2 writing

Yuyan Wei and Yongjie Chen

Introduction

This paper describes how Chinese learners of English at intermediate level were guided through the process of assessing their own compositions. The emphasis of the paper is on four support techniques, each of which is discussed at length. The use of these techniques encourages students to look critically and analytically at their writing, costs the teachers less reviewing time and allows students a sense of safety and certainty, which is most desirable for Chinese EFL learners. The paper also outlines the problems facing the teachers and the students in the process of self-assessment and provides tentative solutions to the problems.

There have been many complaints from teachers who teach College English in China about the heavy load of correcting student work and the low efficiency involved. The complaints are growing with the growing enrolments in colleges and universities, as the teachers are dealing with more and bigger classes and *one class with 50 to 60 students is not uncommon* (Yu 2000: 58). The average workload is three classes i.e. 12 class hours per week in which all the language skills are addressed. Writing is allotted a limited amount of time in class, but the marking of writing at home *poses as a monster of some sort* (Wang 2000: 17). Being trapped within the routines of teaching and marking, the teachers have less time for professional development and cannot give constructive and individual instruction.

The teachers respond differently to the heavy load of marking. Some simply give a score or a holistic comment such as *Good work*, *Excellent* or *Well-done*. However, the student response to one-word comments is that they are *less helpful than comments with the most information (phrasal comments and sentence-level)* (Keh 1990: 301). Other teachers work hard, trying to give an exhaustive comment on student work. More often than not, this painstaking work does not help, because passively reading teacher comments deprives the writers of opportunities to think critically about what they have written and to clarify any doubts that have arisen during writing. Not surprisingly, the students derive few ideas from these comments about how to refine their work.

Being concerned about the need to reduce the marking load and to improve learning efficiency in writing, we have been training postgraduate students to apply self-assessment to their L2 writing. This paper is an attempt to share the procedures we follow to help these students self-evaluate their written work and the solutions to problems that arise with the self-assessment process in the Chinese context.

Literature review

Self-assessment has been given much attention in recent years, owing to a growing emphasis on learner independence and learner autonomy and their significant pedagogic value. As Blue (1988: 101) states: *A deeper involvement of learners in assessment and needs analysis is bound to enhance learning, and it*

should also have the effect of freeing the teacher to concentrate on developing learning materials and giving help in other parts of the learning process. Patri (2002: 109) believes that if the effectiveness of self-assessment could be adequately improved, *the teachers' workload could be partly reduced [and] teachers could then focus more on enhancing their teaching techniques.*

Despite the importance of self-assessment, contexts where learners are put in charge of rating their own performance are *quite rare* (Luoma and Tarnanen 2003: 440). This is especially true of ethnic Chinese learners of English because self-assessment is sometimes presented as a concept unsuited to oriental contexts. For example, Littlewood (1999) indicated in his studies that East Asian students expect the teacher, as the holder of authority and knowledge, to be responsible for the assessment of learning. Chan's (1995) study in Hong Kong found that fewer than half of the Chinese students wished to be involved in the evaluation process. Liu et al (2003) worried about the effectiveness of self-assessment and peer assessment, on the grounds that poor learners would be incapable of critically evaluating their own or their peers' written work. Patri's (2002: 127) latest findings also suggest that to enable Chinese students to perform the tasks of self-assessment effectively they *need training and experience.*

With these findings in mind, our questions were:

- If Chinese students are given the support they need, will they be able to effectively evaluate their written work?
- Since self-assessment is a completely novel idea to Chinese students, will there be any problems with the evaluation process? If yes, what are solutions to these problems?

The writing program and the participants

This one-year writing program is one of the components of the Achievement Course, which addresses the four macroskills. The traditional approach to the Achievement Course in China is generally reading texts from textbooks or handouts given by the teachers. The student task is to comprehend and analyse these texts. The topics of the texts usually served as prompts for follow-up speaking and writing activities in post-classroom tasks. There are four writing assignments for each semester and time allotted to the weekly writing component is less than one class period, usually 45 minutes on average.

The ninety participants in this study, fifteen of whom were female and 75 male, were all postgraduate students at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU). The average age was 23.4 years with ages ranging from 21 years to 28 years. Eighty-nine of the students had passed College English Test Band 4 (CET 4), a national standard English test for intermediate English proficiency under the administration of the China CET Committee. Six had passed CET 6, a test for upper intermediate proficiency level. On enrolment, a placement test focusing on listening, translation and writing was also administered. The placement test results showed that, compared to other postgraduates at SJTU, the ninety participants had lower than average proficiency levels in the three skill areas.

Supporting the writer: the procedure

In terms of writing, the traditional role of the Chinese teacher of English has been to correct student writing and provide written comments and grades. At the same time, the learners simply *write to be judged or evaluated* (Yu 200: 56). As self-assessment is totally new for Chinese students, supporting

and training them for the task becomes a priority in implementing self-evaluation. Figure 1 illustrates how the training at SJTU took place.

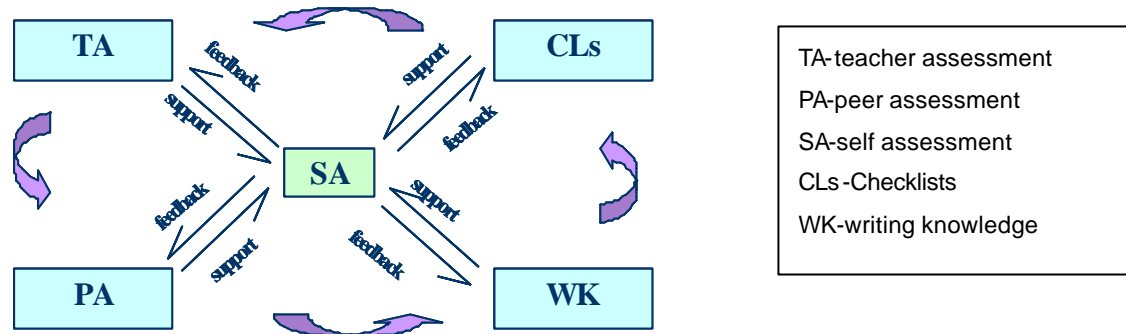


Figure 1: The training process

As Figure 1 illustrates, four supportive techniques were employed to help the students implement self-assessment (SA): checklists (CLs), teacher assessment (TA), peer assessment (PA) and writing knowledge (WK) input. The double direction arrows show that, on the one hand, to improve the quality of self-assessment, the writers needed constant support and instruction. On the other hand, the feedback from self-assessment suggested the kind of support the writers needed from teachers and peers, and what kind of writing knowledge would be helpful to the writers. Each of these techniques will now be explained in more detail.

Checklists

The writers who were engaging in self-assessment for the first time were often confused about how to start their self-assessment and what to comment on. Therefore, a top priority was to provide efficient tools to remind them of the areas needing attention.

Our years of teaching experience had found that there were two main types of problems in L2 writing. The first type was language errors, such as misspellings, run-on sentences, shift of pronouns etc. The second type was problems with development of ideas, organisation and the overall focus of the text. To address the two types of writing problems, we designed two checklists for the writers as instructional instruments. One was a checklist (see below) of writing strategies with questions, (WSQs) to assist writers to focus on the overall aspects of composition and the other was a checklist of error symbols to assist them to focus on grammatical errors.

The WSQs were classified into three categories: content, organization and language. We made it clear that writing problems might vary from individual to individual and the checklist could not cover all problems. To make the checklist more comprehensive and adaptive, the students were encouraged to add more items of their own.

Error symbols were reminders of possible grammatical errors. Correcting language errors is one of the musts in self-assessment but it proved to be the toughest job for the students, simply because their eyes were not sensitive to their own errors. In the event that the writers failed to identify their own errors,

the teachers helped locate them with the symbols as feedback. With the error symbols as reminders, error correction became easier for the writers. As McDevitt (198: 20) states: *certain errors can be isolated by the teacher quite easily, and often remedied by the student if attention is directed to them.* To locate errors with symbols, instead of making corrections directly, helped focus writer attention on their own language. If teachers corrected the errors, writers tended to simply glance at the teacher corrections and make the same errors again in later essays. Their involvement in identifying corrections kept them alert to the errors and correcting their own errors brought them a sense of achievement.

Checklist of writing strategy questions

Questions concerning CONTENT:

- 1 Is your title a good one? Is it too big or too narrow? Is it striking? Can it be improved?
- 2 What's your central idea? Can it cover all the points illustrated in your writing? Is there any point that is not related to the central idea?
- 3 Is your central idea well supported? Do you have enough examples and details to develop your subject clearly? What strategies have been employed? Read each paragraph over carefully and consider the following questions:
- 4 Is there a topic sentence (TP) in each paragraph? Does it express a definite opinion or attitude about your subject that your paragraph supports? Can it be improved?
- 5 Is each paragraph unified? Is there any sentence straying off the TP?
- 6 Is each paragraph well supported?
- 7 Do your ideas or sentences go smoothly?

Questions concerning ORGANIZATION:

- 8 Compared with supporting paragraphs, is your beginning or ending too long?
- 9 What transitional techniques have you used to tie your paragraphs and sentences together - transitional signals, transitional sentences or traditional paragraphs?
- 10 Is your beginning interesting and absorbing? Can it grab the reader's attention and lead them to go further?
- 11 Do you end with a concluding paragraph that wraps up the whole piece and ties it back to the central idea in some manner?

Questions concerning LANGUAGE:

- 12 Are there any grammatical mistakes - run-on sentences, fragments, for instance?
- 13 Check your punctuation. Add or change punctuation marks as needed.
- 14 Check your wording within each sentence. Is there any sentence or expression that is awkward, inappropriate, overly wording or vague?
- 15 Has your language achieved variety of language structures?

It is clear that mere provision of these checklists did not guarantee the successful management of self-assessment. *Even the adult students need to be taught how to work independently* (Taylor 2003: 150). Teacher assessment and peer assessment undoubtedly provided them with good training experience.

Teacher assessment

Teacher assessment and peer assessment provided the writers with assessment techniques they could transfer to their self-assessment. The writing knowledge component of the training process equipped students with the required writing knowledge and skills for evaluating their written work and for solving the problems they encountered in the process of self-assessment.

The first piece of written work was collected and evaluated by the teacher. There were several advantages in doing this before students worked on peer assessment and self-assessment. One advantage was that the teacher's management of this first writing task helped the students gain a sense of assessment. The second advantage was that the teacher was able to have a better understanding of student writing skills and problems. Students from different fields of study at Jiao Tong University demonstrate various language skills. For example, teacher classroom observations indicated that students majoring in arts by and large applied better writing skills in their compositions than those in science and technology. Knowing how well the students could write, and what writing knowledge they had, helped the teachers modify the Writing Strategies Questions and the error symbol list. This made the checklists more adaptive to new students. The final advantage was that teacher comments exposed the students to a source of evaluation models. The following are two samples of the summative comments made by teachers:

This essay is on the whole well organised. However, more supporting details would have been made it fuller. In addition, this work is not free from minor errors, which I believe, could have been avoided with a bit more attention.

Well-chosen examples have made your arguments convincing and persuasive! The power, however, has been at least partly weakened by the abuse of short sentences. It would be better if you combine some of them into longer ones.

Reading the comments, the two writers could at least learn to use assessment terminology such as *organise, organisation, supporting details, argument, convincing* etc.

Peer assessment

After reading the first compositions, the teachers selected two with typical errors and problems. They asked the two writers to print and photocopy their essays and distribute the copies among the students. Then we began to instruct students on how to use the checklists to evaluate one of the chosen essays. Students were grouped into groups of four or five, and each group was asked to write a comment on the first essay. In order to reach agreement within the group, the group members had to argue and negotiate with each other, and these arguments and negotiations helped to clarify their doubts, enabling them to understand the evaluation criteria better. Once the group comments were completed, the teachers asked a representative of each group to read the comments aloud to the class or to write them on the blackboard. These comments were then compared. The differences pointed to gaps in their understanding of the assessment criteria and highlighted areas of misunderstanding and differences in

perception.

Each student was given a copy of the second essay and asked to assess it. With the two checklists as assessment instruments, the students were given a chance to practise making individual decisions. Here is an example of one peer assessment:

Your composition has a clear central idea. There are adequate arguments to support the central idea. The use of transitional expressions is good too. But it can be improved in the following way: the second reason does not completely support the main idea. In addition, there are some wrong expressions; the last paragraph can be shorter and briefer.

The group comment stage of the peer assessment indicated differences in understanding the assessment criteria and focused attention on the ambiguous areas. The individual assessment stage provided practice for the writers to transfer these skills to self-assessment. It was easier to comment on the work of peers than on one's own work. Approaching self-assessment in this step-by-step way reduced student concerns, built their self-confidence and helped them gain experience.

We never chose the worst essay because we thought that an essay with many different problems would mislead students into fault-finding, and then they would be unaware of the strengths of the selected work. A good essay exposed students to the good writing strategies of the writer and enabled them to identify strengths. In addition, if the selected essay to some extent resembled their own in language level or writing skills, the writers would have more interest in being involved in the assessment process.

Writing knowledge

In reading the essays, we have found that some postgraduate students are lacking in writing skills. Despite the numerous compositions they would have written since high school, their writing indicates no evidence of marked progress, besides increasing length and expansion of vocabulary. For example, the most common structuring device used to combine ideas was to use the discourse markers: *Firstly, secondly, thirdly* or *For one thing, for another*. What follows is an outlined first draft from one student's composition:

Firstly, the only child has to support four generations.
Secondly, their work is more stressful.
Lastly, only child generation has their own advantages.

The transition is by no means wrong or inappropriate, but the repetition of this technique in one's work indicates nothing but monotony and impresses on the reader the writer's lack of sophistication.

In this study, the writing techniques were often introduced when analysing the reading texts. The reading materials were all carefully chosen to illustrate certain writing techniques or readability. Before assigning a writing task, we directed the writers to one of the most sophisticated writing techniques in the text. For example, here is how we introduced more transitional techniques when we worked on a

text entitled *Animal research is vital to medicine*:

- 1 *Animal research not only produced vaccines for the treatment of infectious disease, it also led to the development of antibacterial and antibiotic drugs.*
Use of *not only ... also*
- 2 *Despite the success of vaccines and antibacterial therapy, infectious disease remains the greatest threat to human life worldwide.*
Use of *despite* to introduce a new idea and repeating the noun in the previous text
- 3 *Research on animals has been vital to numerous other areas in medicine.*
Use of the directives to introduce new ideas
- 4 *The list continues.*
Inventing a new technique
(Wang 1999: 224-226)

The student removed the sequence numbers in his draft about the one child generation shown above and adopted the new transitional techniques in his rewritten work:

*The only child is **not only** burdened with domestic obligations, he is **also** facing a demanding job in the company **Despite** the pressures from his home and workplace, this young generation excels their peers in **some respects**.*

Self-assessment

When the second writing task was done, students were required to submit their composition with a self-comment attached. To ensure the quality of critical thinking, and given the low language proficiency of some students, the self-assessment comment could be written in English or Chinese, or both, although English was preferable. At the same time, the students were encouraged to seek help from their classmates or to consult teachers, if they felt they needed to. The students were asked to write specific comments through their written work in the margin, using the WSQs in the checklist. They were also asked to write a summative comment at the end of the essay on their strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement. Here are one student's specific self-comments shown in parentheses.

The 21st century (*Too broad!*)

At the turning point of the 21st century, today's college students have different expectations. You may ask, then, what are their expectations? (*I think it is a controlling thesis. Do you think so?*)

Here is her summative comment:

The title is too broad, so the central idea is not well supported. Besides, there is a lack of details such as figures and examples.

On the whole, this essay is well organised. The end of this composition is too sudden. If I make use of a short paragraph to emphasise on the two points again, then it will be better.

I am satisfied with my language. Although there are not too much variety of language structures, the structures used in this essay is well enough.

Problems with self-assessment

While some of the students demonstrated a strong insight into their written work, some students had difficulty in undertaking the evaluation task. Some of the problems participants had in commenting on their work and suggest possible solutions are outlined below.

No Comment

More often than not, the compositions handed in did not include a self-comment. This occurred particularly at the beginning of the implementation of self-assessment. When asked why, some students simply responded that they had *forgotten it*. This is not a surprising response from Chinese students, for almost all of them had never been asked to hand in their composition with a written comment on it. Our reaction here was to return their written work and ask them to comment on it before resubmitting it.

Paltering

Paltering means to speak or act insincerely, as this typical example from a student shows:

My organization is clear. The content is OK. There are some language mistakes.

Despite having assessed peer compositions by using the WSQs and error symbols, some students had various difficulties with self-comment. One reason for this was undoubtedly the fact that they were unaccustomed to thinking critically about their writing. To respond to the paltering comments, we posed questions and put comments such as the following ones in the margin:

Yes, the content is OK. But can you present your supporting details in a more efficient way, for example, by contrasting the two factors?

Yes, there are some language errors. Underline them in the context and try to correct them in the margins.

Another possible reason for the paltering comments was their less proficient command of the working language. Having realized that students who commented in Chinese had done better work than those in English, we gave more freedom to choose the language of comment.

Inaccurate assessment

The students sometimes made wrong comments as a result of being incapable of identifying the problem in their writing or of misunderstanding the criteria. This made the teacher's role significant in ensuring the quality of self-evaluation, as they ticked to confirm the assessment or found major problems that the writer failed to detect. Here is one student's self-assessment with the teacher's comments in parentheses.

The title is too broad, so the central idea is not well supported. Besides, there is a lack of details such as figures and examples.

(Yes, the title is too broad. But I believe the central idea is adequately developed. Figures and examples are only two writing techniques you can choose from. In this case, comparison and contrast are more revealing and you have used them pretty well.)

On the whole, this essay is well organised. The end of this composition is too sudden. If I make use of a short paragraph to emphasize on the two points again, then it will be better.

(v Yes!)

I am satisfied with my language. Although there are not too much variety of language structures. The structures used in this essay are well enough.

(The language is expressive, but I do believe there is still much room to improve its variety and complexity. For example, too many sentences initiate with "I have ...")

Feedback from teachers

After one or two rounds of student self-assessment and teacher feedback, self-evaluated written work reduced marking time by almost half. And more importantly, there were fewer common problems in the students' writing. The students made overall progress, particularly in the organisation and development of ideas.

One example is the way students began their paragraphs. Affected by the Chinese way of thinking and convergence, students had started their introductory paragraphs in more or less similar and usually monotonous ways. After they read the text *American love affair* (Wang 1999: 54-57), students were asked to consider beginnings which would grab reader attention. As we had expected, students began to write different paragraph beginnings. Here is an excerpt from one student's writing

☺ *How r U, Jenny? Spring asked in Shanghai, PR China*

☺ *Fine, thanks, and U? Jenny replied immediately in Montreal CA.*

*Nowadays, like Spring and Jenny, more and more youngsters prefer communicating with one another at home to meeting outside home. We can travel, read, play and even work at home instead of commuting between home and office. This has become a fashionable, smart, leading and competitive way of living and working. What makes such a radical change? **Internet** is the answer.*

Feedback from the students

As part of the evaluation of the course, we asked the students to comment on the usefulness and workability of self-assessment. Their attitudes, by and large, were positive as can be seen in these comments:

Compared with other skills, writing is the component that I have made greatest progress. (Shen)

With the help of the checklists, I found self-assessment is not as difficult as I had believed. (Jia)

We are doing evaluation step by step. I don't think it is difficult. (Ma)

I usually have no time to talk about my composition with the teacher. But writing down a comment as well as my doubts and confusion always make me feel that the teacher is always there and I can always get help. (Liu)

I think the checklist is detailed. After I finished the draft, I read the checklist again to see if I can improve the composition somewhere. It can help me find out some problems. (Ji)

I find I cannot only learn words and expressions from the reading materials, but also skills in writing. (Zhao)

When admitting the benefits they got from self-assessment, the students said that it was much easier to improve structure, than development and language. Some earnest students also said that even if they could find the problems in their writing, it was impossible to improve it to the desired level because of limited language competency. This is, perhaps, what foreign language learners all over the world are dealing with when they feel that progress is slow.

Conclusion: advantages of self-assessment

Given the situation in Chinese foreign language teaching and learning contexts, where teachers are taking on heavier workloads as a result of enlarging enrolments and the students are complaining about the low efficiency in improving English writing, the self assessment technique we have developed provides a means of reducing teacher workload and improving learning efficiency in terms of writing.

Self-assessment encourages students to look critically and analytically at their writing and to take more responsibility for what they write. Being involved in the process of self-evaluation, the students are no longer simply passive recipients of feedback, but become active participants in evaluation.

As far as teachers are concerned, responding to a self-evaluated text takes no more time. Teachers do not have to read student work repeatedly and then write long comments. They confirm the self-comments and point out those areas which the students have not yet identified as needing attention. This is generally a more satisfying and less frustrating task than responding to an unevaluated version of an essay.

Self-assessment also opens up opportunities for exchanges of opinions between teacher and student. As Charles (1990) says, it is ideal to have face-to-face discussion over the written work. However, in most

cases, given the big sizes of the classes in China, there is great difficulty for the teacher and the students in making appointments. The teacher's feedback to student self-assessment, particularly to the problems that the writers have, provides another chance for teacher-student interaction and improves the quality of evaluation. Most importantly, teacher involvement allows a sense of safety and certainty and writers feel that help from the teacher is available.

So far, we have guided the Chinese adult learners of English to evaluate their writing. The results suggest that guided self-assessment is useful, not only for improving the writer's writing skills, but also for reducing the teacher's workload. We hope that this technique will offer teachers, who also work with students of ethnic Chinese or Asian background, an insight into the possibility of, and problems with, promoting learner autonomy.

Clearly, however, additional work is necessary to develop, refine and evaluate the technique. Questions of suitability also require future investigation e.g.

- Is such an approach useful to the writers with better writing proficiency?
- Is such an approach useful with younger students?
- Would the approach prove to be as effective if the teacher shifted more responsibility of evaluation to the students?

To answer these questions, we need more educators working in the area of self-assessment.

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About the authors

Yuyan Wei has a BA in ELT and an MA in English Language and Literature. She is a lecturer in the Foreign Language School of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Her main interests include promoting learner autonomy in the classroom, teaching writing and second language acquisition.

Email: yywei@sjtu.edu.cn

Yongjie Chen is a professor of English, a supervisor of MA and PHD candidates and the Vice-Chairman of the Foreign Language School, SJTU. His interests are pedagogy, second language acquisition and syllabus design.

Email: chenyonjie@163.com