

# Learning Through Reflection : Student Self-Assessment in Language Education

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## **Abstract**

This article is a literature review on the topic of reflection as it relates to teaching, learning, and assessment in foreign language classes. The author pursued this research in order to develop a further understanding of the topic of reflection in education, and to find ways to improve the reflective activities he now uses in university language courses. These reflective activities are primarily student written self-assessments based on videotaped student oral performances, including pair conversations, skits, and presentations. Reflection in education is defined and its relationship to assessment, in particular student self-assessment, is discussed. A brief description of the author's self-assessment questionnaires is included, along with suggestions for further research and improvements to the self-assessment questionnaires discussed.

## **Introduction**

It is often stated that a primary goal of education is to help students develop lifelong learning skills. Yet the reality for students is that due to busy schedules, among other reasons, some of us teachers may lose sight of this goal. It seems obvious that having students think more deeply about their learning would help them

develop skills that they can use throughout their lives. However, many opportunities for promoting reflection in our classes are missed due to lesson planning based on time efficiency. Teachers are often very busy and lesson planning may become more focused on expediency than on developing lifelong learning skills. In the midst of planning lessons, teaching classes, preparing tests, and grading student work, there may be meetings to attend, forms to fill out, and many unexpected occurrences that come up that fill our schedules to the limit. While working in this manner, we look for efficient ways to teach our students and to assess them. In this process, we may at times drift away from a focus on how our students can best learn our subject and focus more on how we can give them information quickly and then efficiently grade them on their memorization and understanding of it. We may not take the time to step back and reflect on how our students learn, on ways of guiding them to think about our subject, and on methods of assessment that do more than merely rank the students in a class.

The word reflection was often used and discussed in various contexts in my graduate program in education. Its importance in teacher education was promoted and it was described as an integral part of the learning cycle in experiential education. One of the most valuable courses to me in my graduate program was one in which I was videotaped while teaching four different lessons throughout the course. Following each lesson, I wrote an evaluation of my teaching based on my observations of my recorded teaching experience. This course taught me the value of student self-assessment and reflection used to promote learning. I learned more from those reflections on my teaching than I did from many of my other courses which were focused more on the delivery of content than on reflection and deeper understanding.

Since that time, I have tried to implement reflective activities into the courses that I teach. In particular, I have focused on student self-evaluation of videotaped pair conversations, skits, and presentations. It is my belief that students learn more about their language production if they are able to observe themselves in their recorded performances and then reflect on what they did well, what needs improvement, and what they can do to improve their language production. They can then use this self-knowledge to improve their language production and more rapidly learn to master the target language.

My interest in developing reflective activities in my courses has prompted me to pursue research into the topic of reflection and its connection with self-assessment in order that I might deepen my own understanding of the topic, and learn better ways to help my students improve their language skills through reflection on their language production. One of my goals has also been to discover new ways to improve the student self-assessment and reflective activities that I currently use in my classes. This paper explores available research on the topic of reflection in education and how it relates to teaching, learning, and assessment in language courses.

### **Definition**

A review of educational literature and research uncovers a variety of definitions for reflection as it relates to learning. In addition, the term metacognition is sometimes used interchangeably with reflection, or in close association with it. Jay (2003) defines reflection as “looking back on experience in a way that informs practice, learning in the midst of practice, and/or making informed and intelligent decisions about what to do, when to do it, and why it should be done.” Cowan (1998) describes metacognition as “thinking about thinking,” and notes that

reflection is a “subset of metacognition.” Banks-Stiegman (1994) states that “knowing what you know and what you don’t know is called metacognition.” Cowan also notes that reflective activities include identifying obstacles to learning and finding ways to avoid those obstacles, and analyzing and evaluating experiences so that performance can be improved.

Jay notes in her discussion of Shon’s work on the study of reflection (Jay, 2003) that “reflection involves shuttling back and forth between thinking and action.” She describes reflection as “pausing after an activity to see how it went—to ask what went well, what didn’t, and what could be changed for the next time” and further points out that asking critical questions can lead to deeper levels of understanding. She says that the purpose of reflection is to “guide future action.” She also writes that some researchers have pointed out that well structured activities designed to promote reflection may produce better quality reflection than randomly occurring instances of reflection.

Simply put, reflection is thinking carefully about a given experience and then using the resultant insights to learn more about what one has done and to implement necessary changes for future performance. In a practical sense, the goal of reflection in education is to get students to think about what they are doing in class, and not just perform an activity, leave class when the bell rings, and then forget what they have experienced in that class. As teachers, we hope that after our classes our students will not be saying what T. S. Eliot once wrote, “We had the experience but missed the meaning” (Ellis, 2001).

## Reflection on Experience

Much has been written about the relationship between reflection and experience. Kolb, Shon, and Cowan have written extensively on this topic. In Cowan's words, what is often referred to as the Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle (Cowan, 1998) can be summarized as a recurring cycle that progresses as follows :

“Experience > Reflect > Generalize > Test > Experience”

In this cycle, each new experience is perceived with deeper understanding. The core element of this cycle is the need for students to follow an educational experience with a time of guided reflection in order to truly learn from that experience. The experience could be a presentation, a skit, an oral or written test, etc. It is up to the facilitator to move the students from one phase of this cycle to the next by asking questions, organizing student tasks, etc. Ellis (2001) writes that we must step back from an activity in order to see it differently. He notes that “all experiences teach us something, but only experiences of quality teach us something worthwhile.”

## The Need for Reflective Learning Activities

“Reflection is as indispensable to great artists as it is to philosophers, diplomats, writers, and scientists. Unfortunately, it is seldom used in schools” (Caine and Caine, in Ellis, 2001).

Cowan (1998) points out that education is changing. In the past, teachers needed to deliver large amounts of content material to students and often had little

time left to teach students how to analyze and evaluate that material. Now, in the current technological era, volumes of information are available electronically, and this information is rapidly and continually changing. Computers have also made research easier and faster. Cowan sites the example of computer search functions that allow students and researchers to quickly analyze pieces of writing for such linguistic elements as the use of a specific grammatical structure, which in the past was extremely time consuming to do by reading a text one page at a time. With all of the recent technological advances, he feels that teachers can better serve their students by guiding them to learn how to analyze and evaluate the information that is available, rather than merely giving them information which may be forgotten soon after the final test is finished. Information is now available at the click of a mouse. Knowing how to use that information and being able to understand and articulate what one's own strengths and weaknesses are in relationship to that information are much more valuable skills for students to develop than mere memorization and test taking skills.

Often, in our busy schedules, we may attempt to rapidly cover large amounts of material, test our students on this material, and then quickly move on to the next items on our syllabi. Cowan contends that by slowing down the pace and giving students time to analyze and evaluate material, as well as their own performances in classroom activities, we can help our students develop learning skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Ellis (2001) agrees by suggesting that teachers focus less on covering large amounts of material and more on exploring selected important topics in greater detail. Memorizing material for a test is an activity that students will rarely encounter in the world when they finish their education. However, being able to locate information, critically consider its relevance and usefulness, and evaluate one's own relationship to this information are skills that our

students can use their whole lives in a world that will continue to change at an increasing pace.

### **Reflective Activities in the Classroom**

Cowan (1998) recommends creating classroom activities in which students must reflect on topics or experiences, and integrating these routinely into our syllabi. He advises teachers to “set up learning tasks that force the students to think.” He points out that it is important for students to learn what they can do well, what they can’t do well, and what they need to do to learn to do these things well. Banks-Stiegman (1994) notes that “only when one becomes aware of his or her own behavior, can he or she begin to be self-regulatory about that behavior. Only when one can step back ‘beyond the cognitive moment’ and plan, monitor, and evaluate can he or she begin to understand and change.” He also suggests that teachers not teach reflection by itself, but rather integrate reflective activities into the rest of the curriculum.

### **Assessment**

One area in education that offers great potential for student reflection, yet often is not used to its fullest potential, is assessment. Assessment of students is performed for different reasons and by different methods. According to Ellis (2001) there are three primary reasons for assessment. One reason is to classify students by giving them grades. These grades are usually based on summative assessment given at the end of a unit or term and indicate how much material students completed and how well they understood that material. Another reason for assessment is to diagnose students for placement. This form of assessment is used

to find students whose educational needs would be better served by placing them in advanced, remedial, or special needs programs. A third reason for assessment is to encourage and support students by providing them with feedback so that they can learn about themselves and their educational needs. This type of assessment is described as formative assessment and is given throughout a course in order for students to understand where they are in relation to the demands of the course, what they need to do to improve, etc. The best assessments will help students improve, and not merely classify or diagnose them. These assessments for improvement will include both the professional assessment of a teacher and input from the students. Ellis feels that “any attempts at assessment without metacognition are deficient.”

Earl (2003) classifies assessment into three categories: “assessment of learning,” “assessment for learning,” and “assessment as learning.” She notes that assessment in education is very often assessment of learning (summative assessment) in which teachers try to grade students on how much they have learned. This form of assessment is focused on the quality of work and may be deemed easier or more efficient by teachers who are pressured by time and workload. The familiar school pattern of study, test, and then quickly move on to the next item is perhaps easiest for teachers. One of the problems with using only summative assessment is that it may lower the self-esteem of some students. Comparing students on a scale with other students in a class may have a similar effect on lower-level students. Earl states that giving advice for improvement is more valuable to students than merely showing them whether or not they succeeded in completing a task successfully.

The other two categories of assessment are an improvement over the mere assessment of learning. Assessment for learning, in which teachers use the results



of assessments to adjust their lessons to better suit the needs of a particular class, is a step in the right direction. An even more valuable form of assessment is one that focuses on the quality of student learning. Assessment as learning is the process in which students monitor their own progress in a course and use what they learn about their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to this course in order to adjust their own learning processes. Earl believes that the skills developed in such student self-assessment are valuable lifelong learning skills. Banks-Stiegman (1994) also feels that reflection is necessary for students to learn how to transfer the knowledge they construct in school to their lives outside of school.

Another advocate of meaningful assessment is Ellis, who feels that teaching, learning, and assessment may be disconnected in many educational situations. He writes that the three should be closely connected, and that the learner is most responsible for his or her own learning (Ellis, 2001). Therefore, student self-assessment should be an integral part of a student's education.

### **Self-Assessment**

Much has been written in recent years about the value of student-centered education versus teacher-centered education. The teacher centered approach finds its roots in behaviorism, which describes education as a series of learned behaviors reinforced by repetition. The student-centered approach to education finds support in constructivism, which sees learning as a process of discovery in which students construct their own meaning for themselves (Banks-Stiegman, 1994 ; Paul, 2003). Ellis (2001) points out that we cannot give our students knowledge. They must construct their own knowledge. Teachers can assist students in this process of knowledge construction by designing courses and activities in which the students

must think about their learning, which in turn promotes the construction of knowledge in the minds of the students (Cowan, 1998).

Ellis (2001) believes that students construct knowledge when they evaluate their own work and reflect on their school experiences. He states that many engaging activities in the classroom that help students construct knowledge often fall short of their full potential because students are not allowed the chance to reflect on what they have produced or performed. Self-assessment exercises provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the process of these activities and to learn more from them.

Cowan (1998) explains his belief in the value of student self-assessment this way :

“My experience in higher education has been such that I judge the introduction of self-assessment ... as the most powerful factor for change and development that I have encountered. ... Self-assessing learners have a keener appreciation than otherwise of what it is that they are trying to do, of how well they are doing it, and thus of what they could do next to improve their performance ; they are formatively self-monitoring their progress, in a directly constructive way, to further their learning and development.”

### **Self-Assessment in Language Education**

Some common activities in language education classrooms fall into what Ellis categorizes as engaging activities that fall short of their full potential to promote student reflection. Many language teachers have students perform skits, converse with partners, give presentations, etc. in their classes, often as a form of

summative assessment. All of these activities may have merit and the preparation for some of these may indeed be very valuable for some students. However, many, if not most, students are understandably nervous before and during tests or spoken activities. This is likely to be even more pronounced when the test or activity is in a foreign language, and is possibly being observed by other students.

Skehan (Levy & Kennedy, 2004) wrote of the difficulty for students to quickly process the many facets of language in a spoken activity. Students are unable to focus on both form and meaning at the same time that they are trying to communicate an idea. Banks-Stiegman (1994) states that it is impossible to be cognitive and metacognitive at the same time. In many spoken summative assessments, students may be more focused on just completing the test than on learning anything from the process. Without some form of reflective activity, tests are soon forgotten and little may be learned from the process.

Granted, most students in such activities or performances will have learned enough to pass the test, and many students may have studied very hard and done very well on the test. However, the pressure of the test may greatly detract from the potential for students to learn from the experience of an assessment on learning. Creating activities that allow students to reflect on what they have performed for a test can greatly increase the potential that they will learn something from the testing process. These activities can turn assessment on learning into assessment as learning (Earl, 2003).

Some teachers who have tried to implement student self-assessment in their language classes have reported that poor students may sometimes grade themselves highly on self-assessments and high-level students may sometimes grade themselves

poorly. Due to the discrepancy between these teachers' judgment of their students and the judgment of the students themselves, some teachers have concluded that student self-assessment is therefore unreliable and of little value. I believe, however, that student self-assessment has value and meaning regardless of whether or not teachers agree with the students' evaluations of their own work. Cowan (1998) notes that there is often some discrepancy between how a student rates his or her work and how a teacher will evaluate that same work. He feels that this discrepancy is a useful learning tool because uncertainty is a part of life in the real world outside of education. A student who can learn to accurately judge her or his own work and does not need to rely on the judgment of an authority figure will be better prepared for life after graduation. Cowan also feels that even when a self-assessment is not directly related to a student's grade for a course, it is still an extremely valuable learning tool.

### **Videotaped Performances for Student Self-Assessment**

Videotaped student performances followed by student self-assessment exercises can add a deeper dimension to student learning. Being able to watch their performances on video allows students to step back from these performances, and from the stress of the experience, so that they can better evaluate their own language production and skills. The "stimulated-reflection" (Levy & Kennedy, 2004) initiated by watching the video recordings of performances allows students to reflect on their own actions and compare them to their own goals or to model performances previously observed in class. This deeper look at their performances can help students construct much more knowledge from their experiences than they could if they had not reviewed them on tape.

In their research of a program using videotaped student conversations to stimulate student reflection through self-assessment, Levy & Kennedy stated that “we have reached a point where we recognize that learners need reflective activities to develop language awareness, as well as productive activities, in order to become effective and autonomous learners.” They also noted that some students noticed errors on the recorded conversations that they did not notice in the actual conversations themselves. They went on to point out that one of the goals in their study on using videotaped conversations to stimulate reflection was to help students develop the habit of alternating between action and reflection in their continued study of a language.

Banks-Stiegman (1994) also believes in the value of recording student work for use in reflective activities following an educational experience. He feels that when watching a recording of their actions, students get a second chance to see subtleties of the activity that they may have missed during the activity itself. He describes the videotaping of student actions as a “valuable self-assessment tool.”

### **Setting Goals for Reflective Self-Assessment**

Earl (2003) writes about the value of teachers giving clear examples of the work that they expect their students to produce so that students can set clear goals. Students can then compare their own work to these goals and monitor their progress toward producing work of similar quality. Showing students the work of experts in the field can help them to focus on what they need to do to produce work that is better than what they are now capable of producing. Taking time to discuss with students what makes these examples good and then involving the students in the development of goals and evaluation criteria for their assignments based on these

examples can help to build student confidence in their own work and in their self-assessment skills.

Ellis (2001) suggests that teachers have students set a few clear and attainable goals. Having no goals leaves students with little direction, while having too many goals can be overwhelming to students and make attaining goals difficult. Similarly, having unclear goals will likely not produce satisfactory results. In addition to having clear goals, students should also have a clear plan for reaching these goals. When students know where they need to go, they can then check their progress along the way to these goals through self-assessment.

Costa (Banks-Stiegman, 1994) recommends that before any learning activity teachers should discuss directions, rules, and strategies with students, then discuss with students their progress during the activity, and finally end an activity with students evaluating how the process went. In addition, reflection can be strengthened by having students evaluate their actions in an activity on several criteria. These criteria could relate to the specifics of the activity itself, as well as to the feelings and impressions of the students regarding the activity. Students could also be asked to clarify what information and materials they might need, as well as what skills they will need to acquire in order to perform a certain activity. All of these methods of initiating student reflection can lead to deeper understanding of the subject by the students.

### **Self-Assessment Questionnaires**

Ellis (2001) feels that teachers should urge students to think about what their feelings are in relation to their learning, and to the learning process. This may help

to motivate students by getting them more in touch with what the learning process is like for them, and what it means to them. Learning is often thought of as merely an intellectual process, but learners experience a wide range of emotions associated with their education, both positive, and negative. When students reflect on their feelings connected with learning, they are getting more in touch with their own personal learning processes. This connection to their own learning processes can help them become more involved in their own learning, and discover what it is that they need to do to learn better.

This type of reflection can be promoted by including open-ended questions about how students feel about a particular task, or about their performance of it, in self-assessment questionnaires. Written reflections are often easier for foreign language learners to produce than spoken ones delivered in the foreign language. Of course, reflections written in a student's native language may be easier for a student to write, and may reveal deeper levels of thought. These may be difficult for a foreign language teacher to review, however. Depending on the level of the student, written reflections in the second language may still be quite beneficial to the student. In addition to the self-assessment process, the student gets the added benefit of trying to put his or her thoughts into words in another language. This process is made even more valuable by the fact that the words that the student is asked to write are about his or her personal experiences, so these words may have personal meaning to the student. This can increase the student's motivation to try to communicate these thoughts in the foreign language.

Cowan (1998) suggests asking students to decide on what criteria they can use to evaluate their work and then to rate examples of their work against the criteria that they have chosen. He also suggests having students explain the difference

between performing a task in an average manner and performing this task very well, and then explaining how their work relates to this scale.

The primary tool that I use in my courses to promote student reflection on language learning is a self-assessment questionnaire regarding the students' observations of their videotaped oral performances. For pair conversation speaking assessments, this is generally an eight question form that asks the students five questions about their own performances, and three questions about their observations of their partners' performances. The students are asked to write at least three sentences for each question, and to answer each question in as much detail as they can. The questions include giving explanations for what they and their partners did well, what they and their partners did that needs improvement, and some questions concerning the recent focus of the course. For example, these latter questions might include questions about their use of grammar, their pronunciation, the questions that they asked, the answers that they gave, the word stress they used, etc. I also include at least one question aimed at deeper reflection that asks the students to explore what they need to do to learn how to improve their performances. I try to word most of these questions so that the students must watch the video to obtain some specific information in order to answer the questions.

I use similar questionnaires for student skits and presentations, as well. I have occasionally included a checklist rating scale that allows students to rate themselves on various points covered in class, particularly for student self-assessment of oral presentations. I now use these checklists infrequently because it seems that answering specific questions requires the students to reflect more deeply than merely checking off points on a rating scale does.



## Conclusion

A review of the available literature on reflection and learning indicates that having students perform reflective activities in their classes does indeed improve the quality of their learning and teaches them important lifelong learning skills. By creating activities in which students must think about what and how they are learning, and about their observations of their own learning processes, teachers can increase the quality of the learning process for these students.

One way to integrate more reflective activities into our courses is to formulate our assessments in such a manner that they include a component of feedback to the students on ways to improve their work, rather than merely showing them how much they failed to learn. In addition, including some form of regular student self-assessment in our courses can further strengthen the learning experience of our students. Student observation of their videotaped oral performances offers one valuable way to stimulate reflection in student self-assessment. This type of stimulated reflection takes traditional oral performance assessments to a much deeper level of learning.

It is important for teachers to look at the big picture and ask ourselves what the purpose of education is. Is it to produce adults who can memorize rules, formulas, and set phrases, or is it to produce adults that can self-monitor and self-adjust their own learning throughout their lives (Earl, 2003) ? If the purpose of education is the latter, which I believe it is, then we teachers should do our best to integrate reflective activities into the courses we teach. One efficient way to do this is through student self-assessment activities.

### **Suggestions for Further Research and Improved Methods**

Based on a review of literature and my own classroom teaching experience, it appears that language learners who observe their own recorded oral performances on videotape and then complete self-assessment questionnaires do gain a clearer understanding of their own language production abilities. It is my belief that this reflection on language production may help students improve their language production more rapidly than if they did not reflect on their oral performances. To verify this and to show to what extent this reflective process may improve language learners' production abilities, or increase the pace of their improvement, an empirical research study is called for. Such a study could compare parallel classes of equal ability students to see if students who reflect on their language production using self-assessment of videotaped performances improve more rapidly, or to a greater degree, than students who do not undertake such self-assessment.

In addition, review of this literature has prompted me to reflect on the student self-assessment questionnaires that I use in my language courses. While reading the research, I came to realize that though my questionnaires do seem to help students to begin the process of reflection on their learning, these questionnaires could contain more probing and thought provoking questions than they do. These questionnaires could be made more valuable to the students by adding and adjusting questions so that they guide the students to reflect more deeply on their own language learning. Questions on such topics as the feelings the students experience while learning a foreign language, what this language means to them personally, how they learn best, what skills they need to develop to become more efficient and effective learners, and further explorations into what they feel that they need to do to improve their learning of language, are recommended. To further expand the

use of reflective activities in language courses, I recommend introducing self-assessment instruments that focus on all phases of language learning in our courses, not merely reflections on the oral production of language.

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