

1 Introducing Self-Assessment in Grade 8

*Khalifa Abdullah Al-Asalam
Batinah North Region*

1 INTRODUCTION

Self-assessment (SA) is an increasingly common feature of language learning curricula. In Oman, SA is one main method of formative assessment in Basic Education and learners have to assess themselves after each unit of the course book. However, in the General Education system of education which currently also operates in Oman there is no self-assessment. The motivation for this study was thus to explore how SA might be introduced into General Education and to examine how learners would respond to it. I was also interested in how SA information from my learners could inform my own understandings of their needs and feelings.

2 SELF-ASSESSMENT

2.1 Definition of SA

SA is a kind of formative assessment (McNamara 2000; Puhl 1997; O'Reilly & Al-Lawatia 2005). It has been defined as learners judging their own performance and achievement based on clear criteria (Ur 1996; Barlow & Coombe 2005; Pinter 2006; Emery 1996). This kind of assessment can be done either in English or in the learners' L1 (Moon 2000; Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou 2003).

2.2 Advantages of Self-Assessment

Brown (2004) and Satterly (1989) agree that SA can increase learners' motivation because of their involvement in learning. Brown (1998) and Smith (1996) suggest that SA promotes learners' reflection on what they have learnt. Harris (1997:13) argues that SA can help students to know more about their own "strengths and weaknesses and then get them to think about what they need to do, in order to get better marks". He adds that this assessment can help to make learners more active. It helps them to know that they have a central responsibility for learning.

Moreover, SA encourages learners to become independent or autonomous (Freeman & Lewis 1998; Al-Hamly & Coombe 2005). Additionally, it helps them to

understand more about their learning process (Cameron 2001). Brown (1998:53) adds that SA can “provide personalized assessments for each student”. Accordingly, this helps the teacher to know more about individual progress or development.

In addition, this kind of assessment can lighten the teacher’s assessment burden (Harris & McCann 1994). Moon (2000) suggests that training learners to assess themselves can save the teacher time because it is hard for the teacher to give detailed individual feedback to every learner. Harris & McCann (1994:63) argue that “self assessment can also be a much more direct and efficient way of getting information than teacher assessment...it is much quicker to ask students directly what problems they feel they have”.

2.3 Problems with Self-Assessment

There are some problems with SA. Firstly; some learners may find it difficult to understand the concept of SA (Cram 1995) and how to do SA activities (Moon 2000; Al-Sinani 2008). Secondly, some students possibly will feel that they have a problem in expressing their feelings and in doing the task because their English is poor (Cram 1995). Moreover, some learners may overestimate or underestimate their abilities (Bailey 1998; Gipps 1994; Al-Jardani 2006; Al-Sinani 2008). Additionally, Brown (1998:54) points out that “the scores may be particularly unreliable in high-stakes situations (e.g. final exams or placement tests)”. Finally, Al-Sinani (2008) suggests that some learners may misunderstand the purpose of SA.

2.4 Implementing SA

According to Freeman & Lewis (1998), SA should be based on specific tasks that the learners have completed. Additionally, it must be carefully designed for the students (Brown 2004; Harris 1997). Brown (2004) adds that learners should have a clear purpose in doing self-assessment. Moreover, learners should be trained to do SA tasks successfully (Lewkowicz & Moon 1985; Harris 1997). Learners who have difficulties in writing their responses or answers in English might be asked “to write their comments and set their goals in their mother tongue” (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou 2003:107).

Besides, SA can be combined with teachers’ assessment (Harris 1997; Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou 2003). Al-Jardani (2006) and Al-Sinani (2008) point out that comparing students’ SA with the teacher assessment can be a useful awareness-raising exercise for learners. Finally, many writers have discussed the importance of following SA with feedback (e.g. Freeman & Lewis 1998; Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou 2003). Brown (2004: 277) recommends that teachers “ensure beneficial washback through follow-up tasks”.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question was: How do learners in General Education classes react to self-assessment? The sub-questions I studied were:

1. Do my learners become more realistic about their own self-assessment after using it for some time?
2. Do my learners appear to do the SA tasks responsibly and seriously?
3. Is there a correlation between the introduction of self-assessment and learners' performance?

3.2 Participants

For this study, I selected 10 of my students from a Grade 8 class in a General Education school. The learners were in their fifth year of learning English and aged 13-15. The textbook they used was *Our World Through English (OWTE)*. These learners had not been exposed to self-assessment in English before but they had experienced self-assessment in other subjects.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected using three methods: task analysis, observation and class tests.

3.3.1 Task analysis

I adapted SA tasks from the English for Me (EFM) syllabus used in Basic Education. I gave my learners four SA tasks, one each at the end of Units 5-8 in OWTE. The first three SA tasks contained similar activities (see Appendix 1). The first activity was a kind of rating scale designed to give my learners a chance to assess themselves on five skills (listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary). In order to do it, learners had to read the given statements and to write a number (1-5) in each box to reflect their self-assessment (5 was high, 1 was low). The second activity included two questions about what activities they liked most and what they did not like. Additionally, in this activity, learners were asked to give some justifications for their answers. They could use either English or their L1 here to give their responses. The third activity aimed to give each learner an opportunity to mention the textbook activity that they wanted me to revise. The fourth activity asked learners to judge their work overall during the previous unit.

This pattern was repeated for the first three SA tasks. The fourth task was slightly different as I wanted the learners to reflect on their work over the previous four units; there was a question therefore which asked them to say how well they thought they had worked in units 5-8.

3.3.2 Classroom Observation

Observation can be used to gather information about a range of issues related to learning. It can be carried out in a variety of situations and it can be conducted as a natural part of teaching (Cameron 2001; Pinter 2006). According to Genessee & Hamayan (1994), the three things which need to be identified by teachers in planning observation for assessment are; (1) identifying what they want to observe (e.g. writing or speaking), (2) identifying how they want to observe (e.g. individuals, groups or whole class) and (3) identifying how they will record their

observation (e.g. checklists, rating scales and anecdotal records).

In this study I developed an observation checklist (see Appendix 2) and asked a colleague to observe the SA tasks in my lessons, to focus on the 10 learners participating in this study, and to answer the questions on the checklist.

3.3.3 Tests

Each SA task was followed by a class test in which I assessed a sample of the material covered in the unit and which was referred to in the SA tasks. Then, every learner had to write his class test mark on his SA sheet next to the assessment for the equivalent skill (e.g. if grammar was tested the learner wrote the score next to the SA rating for a statement such as 'I know when to use the and a'.) I also compared test results and SA scores to find out how realistic the learners' SA ratings were.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Learners' Attitude in SA Tasks

One of the questions I wanted to explore here was how much responsibility learners would show during SA tasks and how seriously they would take them. My observations suggest that the learners became more serious and more responsible during SA tasks. They took time over them and completed them neatly.

Concerning the students' responses and performance in class, I found that some of them did not know how to do the first SA task. As a result, some of the weaker students asked for help from the good ones. There was also a group of learners who asked me for assistance. For example, some asked whether it was possible to circle more than one number in the second activity (see Appendix 1).

In doing the second and the third SA tasks, the number of learners with problems decreased and there was evidence that some learners were taking the tasks very seriously. They wrote long answers and used all the time available to them. Some students were, however, confused about what to do in the second part of the fourth SA task. This was the question where they had to reflect back on the previous four units and to self-assess their work. I gave them some more explanations.

Learners also generally became faster at completing the SA tasks. They needed almost one hour for the first task but by the third task they needed about 20 minutes. This difference can be explained in terms of the learners' greater familiarity with the second and third SA tasks compared to the first. The fourth SA task took longer than the third to complete but this was expected given the different format of the former.

Some of the questions in the SA tasks for first three units asked the learners to explain their answers (e.g. to say why they liked or did not like an activity). Only a few learners answered these questions in the first task and those who did answer wrote in Arabic. As the study progressed there were more open-ended answers, though many remained in Arabic. Examples of comments they wrote are "Doing Activity 8 using games, was very interesting and useful", "I have some difficulties in understanding the new words in the reading activity", and "Speaking task was very long and boring".

4.2 Comparing SA and Test Scores

Each test carried a maximum of 10 marks and assessed two of the issues focused on in the SA tasks. Given that learners could rate themselves on a five-point scale, their maximum SA score on the two items that were also being tested was 10. It is thus possible to compare how much the learners scored out of 10 on the test and what they scored out of 10 on two items of SA.

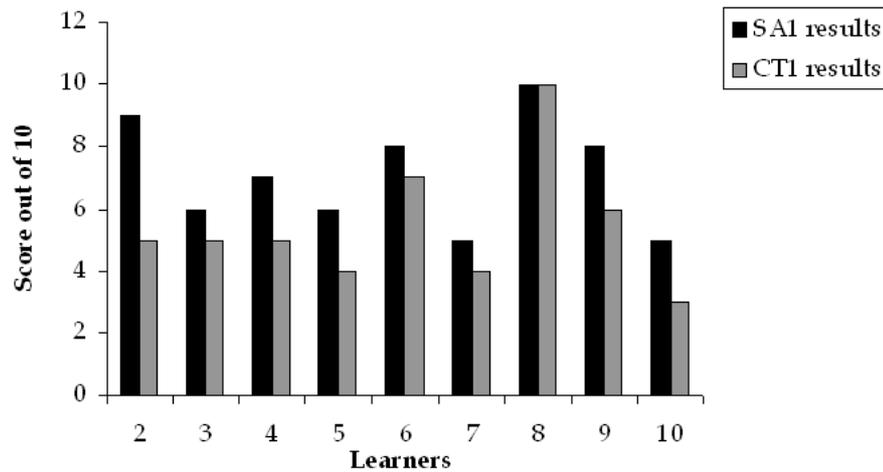


Figure 1: Comparison of first SA and test scores

Figure 1 suggests learners' assessments of themselves were higher than their test scores. Learners may have thus over-estimated their abilities.

Figure 2 shows the equivalent results for SA3 and the class test conducted after the relevant unit of the course book. These results were elicited around two months after the first SA task and class test.

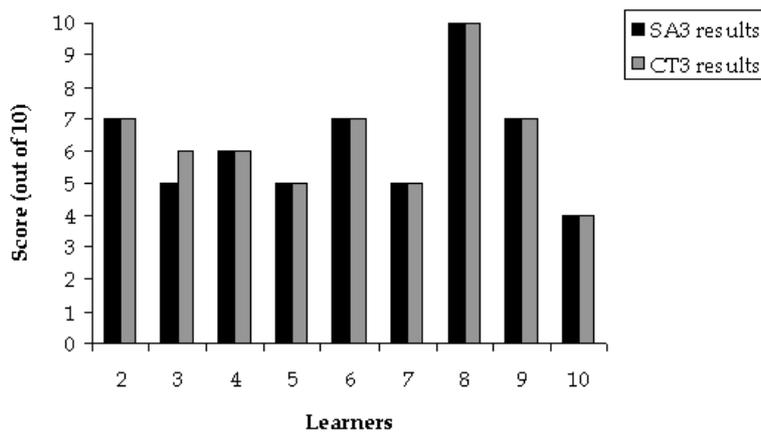


Figure 2: Comparison of third SA and test scores

In this case there was a much stronger correlation between the tests and the SA tasks. SA ratings were never higher than the test on this occasion.

4.2.1 SA and Learner Achievement

Table 1 compares the results of class tests (CT) the learners did in Semester 1, before SA was introduced, and in Semester 2, when they were also doing SA. The maximum mark on each test was 10.

Table 1: Comparison of tests before and after SA

Learners	Before SA				With SA			
	CT 1	CT 2	CT 3	Total	CT 1	CT 2	CT 3	Total
ST1	9	8	9	26	8	9	9	26
ST2	5	6	6	17	5	7	7	19
ST3	5	5	5	15	5	5	6	16
ST4	5	5	4	14	5	6	6	17
ST5	4	6	6	16	4	6	5	15
ST6	7	6	5	18	7	8	7	22
ST7	4	4	5	13	4	5	5	14
ST8	10	10	9	29	10	10	10	30
ST9	6	7	6	19	5	6	7	18
ST10	2	2	2	6	2	3	4	9
Mean	5.7	5.9	5.7		5.5	6.5	6.6	

Seven of these 10 learners did better overall in Semester 2 compared to Semester 1, though the individual increases were not large. In terms of mean scores on each test, there were, however, very clear improvements in tests 2 and 3 in Semester 2.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Improved SA Skills

The learners in this study became progressively better at SA. I can explain this in terms of various steps I took. I explained the purposes of SA clearly to the learners before every SA task. I also reminded them of the importance of their answers and the need for these to be honest. Additionally, I told the learners that I would be using their responses to find solutions for their problems. Very importantly, too, I reassured the learners that their SA responses would not affect their formal assessment scores. Collectively, these strategies supported the learners during the tasks and enabled them to complete these appropriately.

Learners' increasingly ability to self-assess was also clear from the way that their SA ratings gradually became more aligned with their test scores. In other words, they learned to be more realistic in their assessment of their progress. Having the opportunity to compare their test scores to their SA ratings after each unit did I feel contribute to this process.

5.2 Improvement in Test Scores

As noted above, learners' overall test scores were better while they were doing SA than previously, without SA. One explanation for this is that I used learners' SA tasks to review my teaching and to focus more on areas where they felt they were having difficulty. A second factor in learners' improved performance may have been that SA allowed them to become more aware of areas of English which they needed to work more on, and consequently they paid more attention to these areas in preparing for their tests.

5.3 Limitations

The findings of this study are encouraging but it must be noted that I focused here on a particular group of 10 learners in one Grade 8 General Education class in Oman. Their positive responses to the SA tasks cannot be seen as evidence that learners in other General Education schools would respond in the same way. Further research in different contexts is needed to support any such claims.

6 CONCLUSION

I have benefited enormously from conducting this study. I have become more aware of the importance of using SA with my learners and am now convinced that it is a strategy that can be implemented in General Education. It is also clear that learners benefit from SA. I will continue using SA with my learners in order to support their learning as well as to develop my own teaching. I hope that the teachers who read my work will feel that it also gives them some practical ideas about how they can integrate SA into the OWTE textbook.

REFERENCES

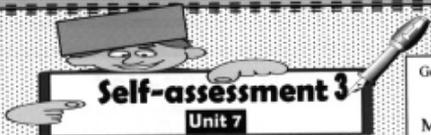
- Al-Hamly, M. & Coombe, C. (2005). Self-assessment accuracy revisited: The Arab EFL context. In Davidson, P., Coombe, C. & Jones, W. (Eds.) (2005). *Assessment in the Arab world*. UAE: TESOL Arabia.
- Al-Jardani, K. (2006). An evaluation of the effectiveness of self-assessment in teaching English to young learners. In Borg, S. (Ed.). (2006). *Classroom research in English language teaching in Oman*. Muscat: Ministry of Education, Oman.
- Al-Sinani, S. K. (2008). Developing learners' self-assessment skills. In Borg, S. (Ed.) (2008). *Investigating English language teaching in Oman*. Muscat. Ministry of Education, Oman.
- Bailey, K. M. (1998). *Learning about language assessment: Dilemmas, decisions, and directions*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Barlow, L. & Coombe, C. (2005). Alternatives in language assessment. In Lloyd, D. Davidson, P. Coombe, C. (Eds.) (2005). *Fundamentals of language assessment. A practical guide for teachers in the Gulf*. UAE: TESOL Arabia.
- Brown, H. D. (2004). *Language assessment principles and classroom practices*. Harlow: Longman.
- Brown, J. D. (Ed.) (1998). *New ways of classroom assessment*. Alexandria, VI: TESOL.

- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cram, B. (1995). Self-assessment: From theory to practice: Developing a workshop guide for teachers. In Brindley, G. (Ed.) (1995). *Language assessment in action*. Sydney, Australia: NCELTR.
- Emery, H. (1996). Children evaluating and assessing their progress in learning. In R. Webb (Ed.), (1996). *Cross-curricular primary practice: Taking a leadership role*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Freeman, R. & Lewis, R. (1998). *Planning and implementing assessment*. London: Kogan Page.
- Geneese, F., & Hamayan, E. V. (1994). Classroom-based assessment. In F. Geneese (Ed.), *Educating second language children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geneese, F. & Upshur, J. A. (Eds.). (1996). *Classroom-based evaluation in second language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gipps, C. (1994). *Beyond testing*. London: Falmer Press.
- Harris, M. (1997). Self-assessment of language learning in formal settings. *ELT Journal*, 51, 12-20.
- Harris, M. & McCann, P. (1994). *Assessment*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.
- Ioannou-Georgiou, S. & Pavlou, P. (2003). *Assessing young learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewkowicz, J. A. & Moon, J. (1985). Evaluation: A way of involving the learner. In Alderson, J. C. (Ed.). (1985). *Lancaster practical papers in English language education (Volume 6 Evaluation)*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- McNamara, T. (2000). *Language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moon, J. (2000). *Children learning English*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.
- O'Malley, J. M. & Pierce, L. V. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.
- O'Reilly, M. & Al-Lawatia N. (2005). On the road to self-assessment. In *ELT in Oman*. Muscat: Ministry of Education, Oman.
- Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Puhl, C. A. (1997). Develop, not judge: Continuous assessment in the ESL Classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 35.
- Satterly, D. (1989). *Assessment in schools*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith, K. (1996). Assessing and testing young learners: Can we? Should we? In D. Allan (Ed.), *Entry Points*. Whitstable: IATEFL.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX 1: SELF-ASSESSMENT TASK UNIT 7



Subanate of Oman
Ministry of Education



Self-assessment 3

Unit 7

General Directorate of Education
of AL-Batinah North

Mohammad Ibn Al Mu' all
School for G.E

Time: 00:20 minutes

Student's name: _____

Class: 8/...

1. How well can you do these things? Write numbers in the squares.

5

very, very well

4

very well

3

OK

2

not sure

1

not very well

A. I can write a short description about the *falajes* in Nizwa. →

B. I know the meaning of the words 'a fist', 'a thumb', 'flow', 'invite' and 'underground'. →

C. I can answer some comprehension questions about the story of *The fist in the falaj*. →

D. I know the difference between singular and plural pronouns. (Page 55). →

E. I can answer a listening activity about some Omani *falajes*. →

A

B

C

D

E

Put your Class Test results here and compare them with your self-assessment.

2. Your opinion about the activities of the unit.

A. Which activity do you like most in this unit? Circle the number of the activity.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Why?

B. Which activity don't you like? Circle the number of the activity.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Why?

3. What is the most important thing you want your teacher to revise?

.....

4. How well did you work?

My work in this unit was: (colour one of these faces)

very good



good



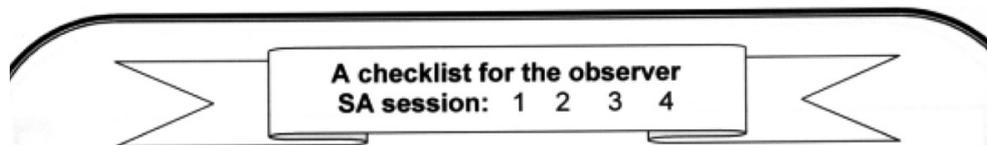
OK



not very good



APPENDIX 2: OBSERVATION CHECKLIST



No.	The Criteria	Yes	No	Notes
1	Did they know how to do the task?			
2	Did they need any support while doing the task?			
3	Did the weaker student ask for scaffolding from the good ones?			
4	Did they ask for help from the teacher?			
5	Did they have any difficulty?			
6	Did they have enough time to do the task?			

How quickly did they do the task?

.....

.....

Please use the space below for any additional notes or comments.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....