

English Conversation:

Self-assessment in the Language Class

Andrew E. Finch
서울 산업대학교 교수

1. The situation

Educators in Middle school, High school, and University are familiar with the problem of low motivation. Our students learn English because they want to get to High school, then they want to get to University, and then they want to get a good job. Because of this English-study is often "instrumental" (learning for a short-term goal), and students rarely have the chance to enjoy the target language (English), or to practice it with native speakers. This often results in the TENOR situation (Teaching English for No Obvious Reason), in which students have very low motivation, and have no wish to continue learning the language once they have passed the relevant examination (Lee 1991). A further problem is that we can only cover a small portion of the foreign language in any language course, so we cannot hope to give our students everything they need to become fluent.

What can we do about this? How can we help our students to enjoy learning English, to *want* to learn English, and to learn by themselves outside of the classroom?

2. Suggestions

1. *Self-knowledge*. Dickinson (1987) suggests that we need to focus on self-knowledge, self-assessment, and self-regulation: "if we see education as "fostering achievement in a personal sense ... an emphasis on personal achievement, seems long overdue". Lier (1996) also talks about the "basic moral purpose of education: promoting the self-actualization of every learner".
2. *Affect and Cognition*. Lier (1996) suggests that if we look at the affective and cognitive components of students' attitudes (motivation, anxiety, beliefs about learning, learning styles, language learning awareness) as well as develop pedagogical techniques (teaching methods and styles), we may be able to increase the length of time students commit to

language study and their chances of success in it..

3. *Authenticity* Students need to feel that what they are learning has "meaning" for them: "Can I use it in my future life?" "Does it deal with things that are important to me?" "Is it based on "real" language as used by native speakers?" Teaching English in the Korean language, using a grammar- translation method does not answer these questions, and cannot be motivational.
4. *Learner-training*. If we teach learners how to carry on learning the language independently ("learning how to learn", needs analysis, goal setting, learning strategies, planning, reflection on achievement), they can take responsibility for their own learning, and they can become involved in making decisions about that learning.

3. Self-assessment

Part of the training learners need is training in self-assessment and self-monitoring (Dickinson 1974, Dickinson and Carver 1980). Self-assessment answers the question "How am I doing?" (Harris 1997), and is a way of attending to affect and cognition. It encourages the student to become part of the whole process of language learning, and to be aware of individual progress, so that he/she can think about (*goal setting*) what needs to be done in the future (*planning*), and can then *reflect* on achievement (further self-assessment).

Self-assessment for formal and informal purposes is both possible and desirable. It is most appropriate for self-monitoring, but it is feasible for other assessment purposes, including testing for *placement* and *diagnostic* testing. Self-assessment is essential for a learner who wants to make some kind of judgement about the accuracy and appropriacy of her performance, and also because self-assessment emphasizes the process, rather than the product of learning.

Learner judgements can be quite accurate (Miller & Ng 1996:139), and. Harris (1997:19) says that we can use self-assessment in the school classroom, since it is a practical tool that can make students more active and can assist them with the daunting task of learning how to communicate in another language. In fact most students find it easier to assess their communicative competence (oral skills) than their mastery of grammar (Blanche 1988:75), so self-assessment is very useful in the conversation class.

Dickinson (1987) has three reasons for using self-assessment:

1. Assessment leading towards evaluation is an important educational objective in its own right. Training learners in this is beneficial to learning.

2. Self-assessment is a necessary part of self-determination.
3. Self-assessment lessens the assessment burden on the teacher.

Oscarson (1989:3) also proposes a rationale of self-assessment in language learning:

1. **Promotion of learning:** Self-rating requires the student to exercise a variety of learning strategies and higher order thinking skills.
2. **Raised level of awareness:** Students need to know what their abilities are, how much progress they are making and what they can (or cannot yet) do with the skills they have acquired." (Blanche 1988:75)
3. **Improved goal orientation:** Engaging the learner actively in the evaluation of learning effects will probably lead to greater interest in techniques for continuous assessment, as opposed to terminal or 'end-of-unit' assessment (Oscarson 1978:2).
4. **Expansion of range of assessment:** If learners can appraise their own performance accurately enough, "they do not have to depend entirely on the opinion of teachers and at the same time they can make teachers aware of their individual learning needs" (Blanche 1988:75).
5. **Shared assessment burden:** Self-assessment is one way of alleviating the assessment burden on the teacher (Dickinson 1987:136). "Combining self-assessment with teacher assessment means that the latter can become more effective" (Harris 1997:17)
6. **Beneficial postcourse effects:** Self-assessment is a necessary part of self-direction (Dickinson 1987:136).

4. Achievement

Achievement, self-determination (autonomy) and motivation are closely related. External achievement, as measured via formal tests, is only effective, for the student if he/she agrees with it. Such feedback can enhance a student's knowledge of success but only if he/she feels that the test was valuable. This does not mean that institutional testing has no place, but we must be aware that public measures "can only measure that which *is measurable*." "It is quite possible that the deepest, most satisfying aspects of achievement, and the most profound effects of education, both in positive and negative terms, are entirely unmeasurable." (Lier, 1996:120).

5. What can we do?

We can introduce self-assessment into our classes in many ways. The pages that follow give

some examples of how to do this. Please check them out:

- [Korean SILL](#): Learning strategies.
- [English SILL](#): *Learning strategies*
- [English ability](#) - 20 questions: Pre/post course self-assessment.
- [Get the most](#): Needs
- [Learning Goals](#): Target situation analysis
- [Who Wants to ...?](#) Target situation analysis
- [Skills sheet](#):
- [Learning project](#): Present situation analysis.
- [Time management](#): Planning.
- [Marriage contract](#): Strategies.
- [Learning contract](#): Learning Strategies.
- [Language learning](#): What are my learning beliefs?

References

- Blanche, P. (1988). Self-assessment of foreign language skills: implications for teachers and researchers. In RELC Journal Vol. 19. No. 1, pp.75-93.
- Blanche, P. (1990). Using standardized achievement and oral proficiency tests for self-assessment purposes: the DLIFLC study. In Language Testing, &, 2, 202-229.
- Blanche, P. & B. J. Merino, (1989) Self-assessment of foreign-language skills: implications for teacher and researchers. *Language Learning* 39(3). pp 313-40.
- Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (1992) The initiation and regulation of intrinsically motivated learning and achievement. In Boggiano, A.K. & Pittman, T.S. (eds.) *Achievement and motivation: A social-developmental perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 9-36.
- Dickinson, L.(1987) *Self-instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dickinson, L. & D. J. Carver (1980) Learning how to learn: steps towards self-direction in foreign language learning in schools, *ELT Journal* 35: 1-7.
- Harris, M. (1997). Self-assessment of language learning in formal settings. In ELT Journal Vol. 51/1, pp. 12-20. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, Wan-ki, (1991). A task-based approach to oral communication testing of English as a foreign language. Ph.D. thesis, Manchester University. Seoul: Hanshin Publishing Co.
- Lier, L. Van (1996) *Interaction in the Language Classroom: Awareness, Autonomy & Authenticity*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.

- Miller, L. & R. Ng (1996) Autonomy in the classroom: peer assessment. In Pemberton *et al.* pp. 133-146
- Oscarson, M. (1978) Approaches to Self-assessment in Foreign Language Learning. Council of Europe: Pergamon Press.
- Oscarson, M. (1989). 'Self-assessment of language proficiency: rationale and implications. In RELC Journal, Vol. 19. No. 1 pp. 75-93