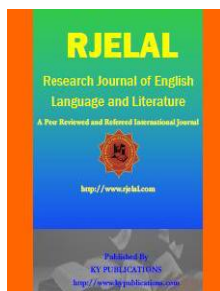




UTILIZING ALTERNATIVE EVALUATION TO ENHANCE LEARNERS' MOTIVATION

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ABSTRACT

There is a general consensus in the literature that motivation is one of the key learner characteristics. Moreover, increasing attention has been paid to the role of learner in the process of language learning and testing. The present study seeks to investigate the possible influence(s) of autonomous evaluation on the motivation of the L2 learners. In so doing, the language learners are involved in the process of learning and testing writing, and the correlation coefficient of self-assessment as one type of alternative evaluation and teacher-assessment has been calculated through Pearson product moment correlation coefficient formula. Also, a questionnaire following an interview has been employed to elicit ideas to see if they were satisfied with the marks given by their teachers, their feelings during the student-involved evaluation. The participants were 25 upper-intermediate students at Mazandaran University. The findings show that there is a strong correlation between self and teacher-assessments and the majority of the participants agreed that alternative evaluation would increase the students' reflective capacity about their own learning, and in this way, increase motivation. As they scored their own performances, the students felt a sense of autonomy.

Key words: motivation; alternative evaluation; questionnaire; interview

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reviewing the history of evaluation in the last decade, it is apparent that the concept of assessment has been changed with the change in educational practice. It has been stated to move away from a teacher-centered perspective on education to one that involves more peer interaction and group activities. Finch, A. (2007) considers the traditional view of assessment as external and "teacher-centered" in which the teacher or external examiner designs and administers the tests. He advocates the student-centeredness and autonomy as the modern views of assessment in which students need to be involved in assessment at every point.

Student-centered teaching and autonomy in language learning have been studied almost thoroughly in the field of ELT since testing is an integrated part of teaching and learning, the language teachers and researchers should focus their studies on autonomy and student-centeredness in evaluation.

On the other hand, motivation is considered as a key element in the process of L2 learning; if it does not exist it is impossible even for a learner with a remarkable ability and aptitude to acquire the elements of a target entity (Dornyei, Z. and Csizer, K. (1998).

In this case, Gardner and Lambert (1972) hold that: "although language aptitude accounts for a considerable proportion of individual variability in

language learning achievement, motivational factors can override the aptitude effect". They also point out that in a setting where the L2 is spoken in the nationwide people learn or acquire L2 regardless of the differences in their abilities or aptitudes. That is because of such importance that many researchers have devoted time and expense to this issue during so many years.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study is to link motivation to autonomy in the form of student-centered evaluation. It is widely believed that autonomy in language learning increases learners' motivation. For example, Benson and Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1987; Ehrman and Dornyei, 1998; and Ushioda, 1996b, assert that autonomy and L2 motivation work collaboratively. If learners take the responsibility of their own learning, this increases their motivation. They also understand that their learning successes or failures are related to their own efforts and strategies rather than other factors (Dickinson, 1987, pp. 173-174). Also Ushioda (1996b, p.2) states: "autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners".

According to Brown (2005), if the teacher plays the dominant role and functions as the decision maker for grades and tests, the learners cannot collaborate in the process of competence building. (p. 388)

So what should be done? Our solution is to involve our language learners in the process of learning and testing language achievements. It is believed that the teachers' authority type, that is whether he or she supports autonomy, gives responsibility to students, lets them have their ideas and opinions, involves them in the decision-making process, etc. is a determinant factor in the motivation of students (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Similarly, Lynch (2010) believes that when students feel autonomous and responsible, teachers should let them direct their own learning.

In a study by Birjandi and Tamjid (2010) about the role of journal writing on the students' motivation reveals that it had a role in increasing the students' motivation.

Deci and Ryan (1985) also believe that a democratic (autonomy-supporting) teaching style fosters intrinsic motivation. In addition, self-determination (e.g. autonomy) is a pre-requisite for any behavior to be intrinsically rewarding. Deci and Ryan argue that the center of motivation in the educational process is the intrinsic motivation. (P. 145)

The present study seeks to investigate the possible influence(s) of student-centered (autonomous) evaluation on the motivation of the Iranian L2 learners regarding their own opinions.

3. Research question and hypothesis

In developing the study, this question has been the main concern:

Is there any relationship between alternative evaluation and promoting learners' motivation?

The following hypothesis was devised based on the aforementioned question:

There is no relationship between alternative evaluation and promoting learners' motivation.

4. The participants

The study has been conducted with a group of mixed 25 EFL undergraduate students studying literature at the department of foreign languages at Mazandaran University. The participants were supposed to pass the writing course. They were homogeneous in terms of their levels of proficiency.

5. Data collection instruments

In the present study, attempts are made to investigate the existence of possible relationship between alternative evaluation and learners' motivation. In so doing, an open-ended questionnaire as well as an interview have been utilized as two main instruments of the study. The questionnaire included some questions to elicit ideas from the respondents to see if they were satisfied with the marks given by their teachers, their feelings during the possible self- and peer-assessment or student- involvement in evaluation.

They were also asked if they are able to evaluate themselves and their peers fairly. These questionnaire items were stated in English.

In the second stage of the study, the learners received training on the writing skill in which they were asked to evaluate their own knowledge of writing ability. The scale of rating for written tasks

proposed by Brown and Baily (1984, cited in Brown, 2004, pp.242-245) was utilized for the purpose of training the assessment to the learners.

Finally, they were interviewed face to face on their motivation and the effect of evaluation on their motivation level.

6. Data analysis

The SPSS statistics 16.0 was used to calculate the percentage of the learners' attitudes in the questionnaire. Also, correlation coefficient formula was utilized to calculate the relationship between student marks and teacher marks.

7. Procedure

The questionnaire had been validated before distributing among the participants. It was given to several experts in the field for this purpose. The next step in the process of the study was the distribution of the questionnaire within the 15-minute time limit. The participants were allocated 15 minutes to reply. Then, the participants were required to write an essay of an appropriate length on their topic of interest. One point should be noted that they had received enough instruction in essay writing course and the teaching material in this class was "Barron's How to prepare for the TOEFL essays". So, at this stage they knew how to write an essay. They used the scale of rating for written tasks proposed by Brown and Baily (1984, cited in Brown, 2004, pp.242-245) for getting familiar with the criteria.

In the next stage, the instructor selected 3 or 4 essays from those written previously to provide a sample for the assessment. The teacher wrote some examples on the board trying to pinpoint the mistakes or errors which did not match the standard target criteria. He then discussed and analyzed the mistakes made by students to show them the way of doing the assessment and error finding. In the next session, the participants were supposed to write the intended essays. Then the papers were evaluated by the students themselves. On the other hand, the teachers evaluated the essays as well. Finally, the participants were interviewed.

8. Results of the questionnaire

The students stated self-assessment could increase their learning and raised the level of their critical thinking. The self-confidence of the learners

increased since they could assess each other independently.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that most of the students have positive attitudes only towards student-involved evaluation since it promotes their level of motivation. Chen (2008) found similar results; her students had positive attitudes towards self-assessment which was a good replacement for teacher-assessment. On the other hand, Ross (2006) believes that the teachers' concern about self-assessment is the fear that sharing control of assessment with students will lower standards and reward students who inflate their assessments. They doubt about the students' ability to do self-assessment and argue that if they do not put the effort in to it, self-assessment will not work.

In this study, the students believe that the process of student-involved evaluation helped them improve their learning. This is actualized by focusing on the learners' strengths and weaknesses during the process of assessment. This finding is parallel with the findings in Anderson's (2008). He believes that one should move away from regarding assessment as reward and punishment, and instead see it as a source of enlightenment and help. He adds that assessment could be used to improve learning. Roberts (2006) holds that the tests should be replaced with assessment for the purpose of learning improvement. In the present study, the learners have emphasized the involvement of themselves in the assessment process both for reducing the anxiety in teacher exams and for doing the assessment independently to improve learning. Birdsong and Sharplin (1986) report a remarkable number of students who had positive attitude towards peer-assessment. Referring to the similar issue, Cullingford (1997) suggests that the best way to overcome fear or nervousness in exams is to involve the students and prepare them with test-taking strategies.

8.1 Descriptive statistics

The following table shows the descriptive statistics for 25 students in a writing class. v.1 is defined as SA and v. 2 as TA. The table provides the number of students, minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the scores as well.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of 25 Students in Writing Class

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
v.1	25	9.60	19.20	14.8892	2.42858
v.2	25	8.00	17.00	12.4400	2.80000
Valid N (listwise)	25				

v.1= SA, v.2= TA

The results of the correlation coefficient between SA and TA have been indicated in table 2.

Table 2: Correlations between SA and TA in Writing Class

		v.1	v.2
v.1	Pearson	1	.717(**)
	Correlation		.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	25	25
	N		
v.2	Pearson	.717(**)	1
	Correlation	.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	25	25
	N		

v.1= SA, v.2= TA

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows that there is a significant correlation between SA and TA. The correlation between SA and TA has been reported as: .717.

As a conclusion, since there is a significant correlation between self and teacher-assessments in writing skill the hypothesis should be rejected at this point.

9. The analysis of the interview

In the following questions the concept of student-centered evaluation has been mentioned with self-assessment and peer-assessment as the two forms of alternative evaluation.

9.1. Satisfaction with traditional teacher-assessment: Responding to the first question in the interview, the majority of the students were not completely satisfied with teacher-given marks. These students believed that the teachers focus only on the wrong or right answers but not the students' learning progress during the course. A number of them thought the teachers assess the students unfairly.

9.2. The students' attitudes towards self-assessment: A vast number of students showed

positive attitude towards evaluating their skills by themselves. They reasoned that by so doing, they can easily pinpoint their possible strengths and weaknesses and consequently try to remedy the weaknesses. Therefore, it leads to further learning.

Some of them rejected this idea since they believed that they cannot judge themselves and cannot decide for their own performances. Some of the students, especially those who were stressful considered it as a difficult and non-motivating job.

9.3. Attitudes towards doing peer-assessment (assessing the classmates): More than half of the students were interested in assessing their classmates in writing classes. Although they did not have enough experience in doing so, they surmised that it will help them learn something from their performances, from their weaknesses.

Moreover, their classmates will be provided with feedbacks which result in further grasping of learning points. They could also compare their classmates with themselves to know their own as well as their classmates' levels better which leads to competition.

9.4. Students' involvement in the assessment process: In this case, more than half of the respondents were positive about the student-involvement in the assessment as well. They mentioned they can detect each others' weaknesses, gain experience, improve their abilities and create a healthy competitive atmosphere. They also added they will be able to spend more time with peers than with the teachers.

9.5. Ability to do self-assessment and peer-assessment: The number of those who thought to have the ability to do so was close to the number of those who did not. Those who stated their lack of ability referred to the lack of knowledge and experience. They also concluded that with practice and experience they can do it better. They also pointed they will do it better if the appropriate criteria are specified.

9.6. The effect of student-given scores on final score:

The majority of the respondents showed a positive attitude towards the students-given scores combined with the final teacher-assigned marks. One student claimed it is helpful in cases where teachers miss or disregard two or more points in evaluation. Some stated that it depends on the personality of the teacher. Most of the teachers make the final decisions themselves and do not like to involve students. Maybe they do so because of the students' lack of skill and experience in doing so.

9.7. Students' feelings during the assessment of their peers:

A large number of the students were positive and some of them were negative about being assessed by the classmates. The majority of the respondents had no idea about it. In the questionnaires, the respondents reported the feelings of happiness, sympathy, goodness, dislike, being honest, logical, proud, satisfied, mundane, responsible, arrogant, being helpful, serious, embarrassed, stressful and afraid of not being fair.

9.8. Students' feelings during the self-assessment process:

More than half of the respondents stated being comfortable and making progress. But others felt worried, stressed, having low self-confidence, nervousness and depression. They believed it would be difficult and require experience and training.

9.9. Students' feelings during the teacher-assessment:

A large number of students stated negative attitudes about the teacher-assessment. 1. They felt stressed and afraid of being ignored by the teacher. But an equal number stated if the teacher is a kind of person who does the assessment fairly, 2. they feel good and happy. Additionally, if they have enough knowledge in the course they have self-confidence and feel positive.

9.10. Students' feelings while being assessed by their peers:

A lot of students stated they will feel negative while being assessed by their peers since their classmates are not fair and do not have enough experience and knowledge in assessing other students. Almost a very limited number of the respondents reported the feelings of happiness and comfort during the assessment by their peers. 5.

10. Conclusion

The involvement of the learners in the assessment process increases the reflective capacity

and the level of the critical thinking. This is parallel with what Underhill (1987, p. 24) states. He believes that "where several learners are involved in a test task at the same time they can be asked to assess each other as well as themselves. This group assessment... makes the judgment more authentic as in real life,..., using the same scale, will help the learner to make his own self-judgment more critical and accurate".

For self-assessment it should be noted that students had difficulty deciding about their own levels of ability, and tried to skip it. They were interested in doing self-assessment for the purpose of learning rather than testing. They could not easily assign mark to their own performances in both groups.

The analysis of the questionnaire and responses to the interview showed that although some were not interested, most of the participants had positive attitude towards their involvement in the evaluation procedure. Those who did not like it reasoned that somebody with higher ability and knowledge should judge their performances; the learners are not able to do so; they may not be fair; they lack enough confidence and experience. Also, student-involved evaluation creates stress, and friendship affects the results. But most of them were interested in doing so according to the following reasons:

The learners can enhance their input (in learning) by focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of their own.

It could raise the level of the students' critical thinking and reflective capacity by focusing on their performances and zooming on the mistakes and weaknesses.

This process helped students feel independent in the educational context. As they scored their own performances, the students felt a sense of autonomy.

It is better than teacher-assessment. They had less anxiety and more motivated.

It reduced the burden of marking by the teacher. The final mark is a kind of a mutual agreement between the teacher and the student.

Based on the aforementioned research question and hypothesis, it can be concluded that

the students have positive attitude towards their involvement in the evaluation process. They prefer the student-given marks over the teacher-given scores. Additionally, they find the alternative evaluation motivating. They claimed it can help them learn more and focus on their skills and progress.

Involving students in the process of assessment leads to the knowledge of how to do it independent from the authoritative teacher. Autonomy in the world of education would be the starting point for independence in the real world of every human being. As the assessment done by teachers brings negative outcomes to the learners their involvement in the process leads to increased motivation in both learning and testing. They would be motivated if they take the responsibilities of learning and testing themselves since they focus on their weaknesses and strengths and try to find solutions to their problems. They activate their potentiality of self-reflection and critical thinking.

Moreover, this type of assessment helps the teachers by reducing the assessment burden. Students share the marking workload and the teachers find more time to improve the quality of their teaching.

Teachers can also find some new considerations in the assessment by involving students in the process. They would be able to develop the new modes of testing the learners' abilities by eliciting some techniques from the learners.

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