

NEGOTIATED ASSESSMENT OF EFL TEACHER CANDIDATES THROUGH ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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Abstract

This study reports on the results of the first phase of an action research dealing with problems related to the assessment process of pre-service EFL teachers. Self-assessment at higher levels of education is an up-to-date issue with discussions concerning different aspects of the topic. One of these aspects is negotiated assessment, a process in which learners try to come to terms with their instructors over grading their performances. In this study, this assessment paradigm was used to solve assessment-related problems. Not satisfied with the grades they had received in a previous course, a class of 19 third year pre-service teachers participated in the study with an orientation to have a say in their grading system. To this end, an online discussion form was created, and the participants posted their ideas about how they should be assessed in the related course. The instructor contributed to the discussions by helping the participants understand different dimensions of assessment process in general. Through these discussions, a self-assessment scale was constructed, and the participants were asked to grade themselves by using the scale they created collectively. The instructor also graded the participants by taking into account the parameters in the scale. Then the instructor and the participants tried to negotiate over the most reasonable grade for each of them. It was observed that this interaction between the instructor and the teacher candidates had a potential to increase the effectiveness of the assessment process. Most importantly, it seemed that this kind of assessment paradigm was very likely to have positive effects on the overall motivation of the sides involved in the teaching/learning process.

Keywords: Negotiated assessment, self-assessment, pre-service language teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Metacognition in education is a topic with a bold focus on the learner. According to Flavell metacognition refers to one's own knowledge about his/her own cognitive processes or anything related to them [1]. It has been discussed that metacognition makes people better learners and is related to intelligence in general [2]. This approach has led researchers to investigate whether metacognition could be acquired or not, and it has been suggested that it is possible to acquire metacognitive skills through instruction [3].

The benefits of metacognition has been questioned and it has been suggested that metacognition enables students to benefit from instruction [4]. Furthermore, being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses is potentially rewarding in the process of learning.

Functions of metacognition has also been a topic of concern for researchers. For example, Luca and McMahon [5] assign three functions to metacognition;

- Metacognitive awareness: individuals' awareness of their learning process, knowledge about content knowledge, and knowledge about their own strategies
- Metacognitive evaluation: individuals' judgments of their capacities and limitations
- Metacognitive regulation: the conscious modification of thinking using cognitive resources.

The second function of meta-cognition, metacognitive evaluation, is the focus of the current study. Individuals' judgments of their capacities and limitations is directly related to the concept of self-assessment. Self-assessment is a relatively new term that has been around for more than a couple of decades. According to the Council of Europe, self-assessment is actually judgments about one's own proficiency [6]. When Dickinson mentioned the term, his focus was on learner autonomy [7], and others also acknowledge the strong link between autonomy and self-assessment [8], [9]. When considered with other aspects of learner autonomy, self-assessment could be used as a complementation in creating effective learning environments.

Several studies have been carried out to analyze this potential of self-assessment in various settings with many variables. Self-assessment have been compared with peer assessment [10], [11], [12]; its relation with learning styles [13]; teacher assessment [11], [14]; foreign language skills [8], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22] are among the topics that have been considered. Self-assessment skills have even been a topic in teaching young learners [20].

Cassidy analyzed the level of inexperienced students' self-assessment skill to examine its relationship with learning style, student perceptions of academic locus of control and academic self-efficacy, and the results of the study suggested that there seems to be a tendency among learners to underestimate their performance [13]. The findings revealed that among the four approaches to leaning (deep, surface, strategic and apathetic) surface learners appear to be inclined to provide lower evaluations of their own performance.

Leach also found that higher achieving students revealed signs of underestimation while the lower achieving ones tended to overestimate their achievements [23]. In the same study it was reported that there was no significant difference between the self-assigned scores and the scores assigned by the teacher.

Studies examining students' attitudes towards self-assessment process have revealed contrasting results. For example, Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling reported positive student attitudes towards the process [24]. The participants stated that self- assessment enabled them to think more and they felt that they were learning more. On the other hand Mires, Friedman Ben- David, Preece and Smith suggested that students find many more disadvantages than advantages in self-assessment [25]. Some of the disadvantages mentioned by the students were that

- they felt stressed during assessment
- they did not trust their own grading
- they had uncertainties about grading
- they found the task too difficult to achieve

When the topic of discussion is assessment, two types are often mentioned: summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment refers to the type of evaluation of individuals performed at a particular time [26]. On the other hand, formative assessment is a more flexible procedure carried out during learning with ongoing feedback to learners. Negotiated assessment, which is a form of formative assessment, is the exchange of ideas between the instructor and the learner in order to reach an agreement on the learners' performance during the learning process. The rationale behind the inclusion of both sides into the process could be related to the doubts that have been casted on the reliability of self-assessment process in formal education. Some researchers claimed that self-assessment has serious limitations [27]; furthermore some others have suggested that the interaction between the self-theories held by a teacher and a student might be particularly significant [28]. Therefore, it seems reasonable to include both the learner and the instructor into the evaluation process.

1.1 The present study

The present study is an action research in nature, and it tries to deal with a specific immediate problem in a teaching context at university level. The participants are third grade language teacher candidates. The problem that is being addressed was first observed in when the participants were at the second grade. It was observed that among these participants there was a great amount of dissatisfaction with the assessment process. Nearly all of the participants were expressing negative ideas concerning how they were assessed at the end of the terms. This confusion was actually related to the lack of information about the variables involved in the grading procedure. Even when these variables were shared with the participants, they were not fully satisfied with the results. By taking into account this problem and the results of the previous studies that have been mentioned thus far, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

What do language teacher candidates think about negotiated assessment procedure?

2 METHOD

With an aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the problems that were mentioned in the previous section, a qualitative approach was chosen. Coupled with the contextualized aspect of action

research, qualitative paradigm appeared to be the most suitable research method for the current study. In general terms, the purpose of action research is actually to solve a specific problem and to produce guidelines for best practice [29]. There are certain steps involved in the process as is shown in Fig. 1.

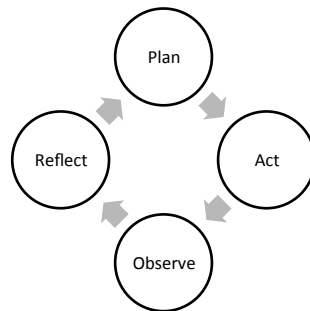


Figure 1. Action research cycle

The cycle presented in Fig. 1 is obviously a repeating one. It is commonly accepted that action research can begin at any of the points in the cycle [30]. As was earlier, the current study began with the observation that there seemed to be a noticeable dissatisfaction among the participants concerning the grading system that the course instructor was employing.

2.1 Participants

19 pre-service language teacher candidates participated in the current study. The teacher candidates who participated in the current study were third grade students at a state university in Turkey. Eight of them were males and eleven were females, and their ages ranged from 21 to 28.

2.2 Procedures

As was mentioned earlier, this study came out as a result of observation of dissatisfaction among teacher candidates about their grading process in a particular lecture. This observation led to reflection on the instructor's side. Inclusion of the candidates into the assessment process appeared to be a reasonable solution to the problem. To this end, a web-based discussion forum was created and the participants were asked to come up with criteria through which they should be graded. These discussions lasted for nearly two months, from the beginning of a semester through the end. The discussions were led by the instructor in English, but the participants were free to come up with any criteria. Therefore, most of the criteria appeared at the end were not analytical but holistic ones without any focus on the learning outcomes of the related course. The criteria shared by the participants were first person subjective statements. The participants were also asked to agree on the importance of each criterion by assigning each of them points out of 100. Fig. 2 demonstrates an extract from these discussions.

Figure 2. An extract from online discussions carried out by the participants

The following list of criteria was agreed on by the participants at the end of this two-month process:

1. I carried out extensive studies about the lesson (articles, library, and the internet). (20 points)
2. I attended the lectures regularly. (15 points)
3. I participated in the lectures. (15 points)
4. I came to the lectures prepared. (15 points)
5. I participated actively in online discussion. (15 points)
6. I did not speak Turkish in lectures unless it was totally necessary. (10 points)
7. I realized the relationship between theory and practice. (10 points)

In the negotiation process, which corresponds to the acting step in the cycle, before the interviews, each participant was graded by the instructor depending on these criteria. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to reflect on their own learning by taking these criteria into account. In the next step, they were allowed to share their ideas with the researchers in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. To ensure that the participants are as comfortable as possible, they were allowed to speak in their native language, Turkish. During these interviews, the participants were first asked to evaluate their learning experience during the semester, and then they were asked to assess themselves regarding each of the criterion listed above. In the last stage of these interviews, the participants were prompted to talk about this negotiation technique as an assessment tool.

Participants' answers were recorded digitally and transcribed double-checking with the participants themselves; and they were also asked to clarify any meaning ambiguities in their interviews. The final transcriptions were analyzed with an inductive thematic approach i.e. the transcriptions were analyzed with an orientation to "move from the data to the theory and from the particular to the general" [28].

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As this is an on-going study, the first common theme that appeared during the analysis process will be discussed in this section. Before going into details about this common theme, first of all, grades assigned by the participants for themselves and the instructor's grades for the participants were compared to see the extent to which these two differ. This information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Grades assigned by the participants for themselves and the instructor's grades for the participants

	Self-grade		Instructor's grade	
	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum
Participant 1	60	70	80	85
Participant 2	60	80	75	80
Participant 3	60	70	75	80
Participant 4	65	85	90	100
Participant 5	65	85	80	85
Participant 6	75	85	90	100
Participant 7	65	85	90	100
Participant 8	40	50	60	70
Participant 9	65	90	85	95
Participant 10	75	85	85	95
Participant 11	70	80	80	90
Participant 12	70	85	90	100
Participant 13	70	90	85	95
Participant 14	65	70	80	85
Participant 15	50	80	85	95
Participant 16	70	80	90	95
Participant 17	5	10	50	70
Participant 18	60	70	70	80
Participant 19	65	85	65	75

Table 1 shows participants' lowest and highest grade expectations along with the instructor's grading range for each participant. It is interesting that nearly all of the participants assigned lower grades compared to the instructor's grades. This finding is in line with some previous studies suggesting that some learners tend to underestimate their achievements [13], [23].

The second point that was checked was participants' orientations about the negotiated assessment process. The transcription was checked for positive and negative statements describing the process. However, one of the participants revealed neither positive nor negative notions by stating that s/he was confused.

Table 2. Participants' orientations about the negotiated assessment process

	n	%
Positive ideas	16	84.20
Negative ideas	2	10.53
Confused	1	5.27

Table 2 reveals participants' general ideas concerning the assessment negotiation. It is clear from the table that 16 of the participants (84.20 %) expressed positive ideas about the activity; two of the participants (10.53 %) were negative about the process, and one of the participants (5.27 %) stated that s/he was confused about what s/he was supposed to do. This situation actually shows that the participants are predominantly positive about negotiated assessment of their learning process. This finding also confirms some previous studies reporting students' positive attitudes towards this kind of assessment [24].

In order to further analyze the participants' ideas about the assessment process, their responds were checked for commonalities with an inductive thematic approach. The following ideas of the participants were regarded under *awareness* theme.

Participant 1

"When I analyzed these items, I realized where I was, or I realized what I was doing and how much I was doing it. The criteria came out step by step during the semester, and, in time, I started to question myself about how much of these things I was doing by and by."

Participant 7

"... that is why this activity made me question myself."

Participant 9

"I think self-assessment should be performed at universities. One gets shocked. I don't know how to put it, it makes you become aware of things. We come to school, teachers grade us but this activity made us aware of this grading process. It's a very difficult thing..."

Participant 10

"Before this activity, I didn't use to think about what kind of a student I was. Now, with these criteria I am beginning to question about these things, our job has become much easier."

Participant 13

"I realized that there is always a better one. I also realized nobody is perfect, there are always things to be developed. If it hadn't been for this activity, I could have never realized some things."

Participant 14

"...I can say that I learned myself better. Through this self-assessment activity, I learned things that I live in my mind. People should be aware of themselves. At least they should be in peace with themselves."

Participant 16

“... we are self-assessing ourselves, we are able to see our shortcomings, and we can work on these to improve ourselves.”

When the statements made by the participants are analyzed a common theme can actually be observed. In all of the above statements, the participants are actually dwelling on the awareness aspect of the assessment process. The phrases *becoming aware*, *realizing* and *questioning* are constantly repeated forming this common theme. One point is worth mentioning here: the open ended question that was addressed to the participants, in fact, does not involve such phrases; on the contrary, they emerge from the context at hand naturally.

4 CONCLUSION

The current study was carried out with an orientation to solve specific problems in a learning environment at university level. Since these problems were too intricate to be solved instantly, some steps had to be taken. The first cycle has been completed to an extent with some promising results as to the solution of the problems stated previously. In the next cycle of the current study, after all themes have been settled, the effects of negotiated assessment over participants' success and motivation will be analyzed.

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