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Using self-assessment to maintain motivation in a dynamic classroom environment: An Exploratory Practice inquiry of one Japanese university speaking course

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This paper presents a practitioner's account of the use of student self-assessment for classroom participation scores at a Japanese university, worth 30% of the overall grade for the semester. It explains how experience of teaching an EFL speaking skills course has led to the initiation and further development of this method of assessment as a way to foster greater autonomy. The purpose of expanding the learners' locus of control in this way was to help them maintain motivation. This paper presents data from 2 years of an ongoing Exploratory Practice inquiry with which the practitioner has been engaged for over four years. The data is from pedagogically generated sources and teaching journals, as well as an anonymous questionnaire completed at the end of the course. In-keeping with the philosophy of Exploratory Practice, one of the aims has been to improve the quality of classroom life and to involve the learners in a process of research which directly contributes to their classroom experience. Motivation is approached from a complex dynamic systems perspective, looking at the interactions and processes that define it. An attempt is made to bridge the complex dynamics of motivation with actual teaching practices and classroom-based practitioner research.

Keywords: Self-assessment; autonomy; motivation; practitioner research; Exploratory Practice

Introduction

Studies into motivation are increasing dramatically, described as a "surge in research output" in the last ten years (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 89) and recently there has been a great deal of interest in examining the concept of L2 motivation from a complex dynamic systems perspective (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015; Kimura, 2014; Mercer, 2015; Nitta & Baba, 2015; Ryan & Irie, 2014; Ushioda, 2015), which views motivation as a process, dependent on a myriad of other contextually situated variables. There is also now a large body of literature which investigates the connections between learner autonomy and L2 motivation, and the interdependence of these two complex phenomena (Gao & Lamb, 2011; Little, 2007; Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011; Ushioda, 1996, 2006). As a result of these developments, it may seem to practitioners of language teaching that these two areas have grown rather abstract and complex over recent years. Even at university level, not all practitioners are actively engaged in research, and very few language teachers are qualified to PhD level or have the time to read up on current trends in the theory of language acquisition (Lowe, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the way these theories manifest themselves in the lived experience of classroom-based language learning, and to seek out a kind of praxis by demonstrating how these theories actually operate and influence the dynamics of the

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classroom. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the complex interplay of autonomy and motivation in action.

This paper will first outline the interconnectedness of autonomy and motivation from the perspective of complexity theory, and attempt to illustrate how these ideas are relevant to this study. Next, the paper will present a very brief overview of the use of self-assessment in education and more specifically in language learning. The paper will then present findings from the Exploratory Practice study in which students at a Japanese university were invited to use self-assessment to assign their own grades for classroom participation. Finally, the paper will show how the findings can justify the use of self-assessment as a bridge for developing autonomy and helping students to maintain motivation.

Autonomy and motivation

Motivation is an essential component in the way autonomy is conceptualised, and vice-versa, because in many ways the two concepts are essentially connected to the same fundamental core of ownership. The connection between autonomy and motivation seems quite clear: the more responsible a learner is for their own learning, the more motivated they must be to take that responsibility; "autonomous learners are by definition motivated learners" (Ushioda, 2011b, p. 223). One seems unlikely to be present without the other, as Dörnyei states, "autonomy is a powerful contributor to motivation" (2001, p. 101), but also autonomy requires motivation and motivation in turn depends on autonomy.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci, Kasser, & Ryan, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a theory of motivation which is structured around three principles: learners are more likely to engage and invest in the act of learning if they are afforded a degree of autonomy or self-volition; learners need competence, meaning they believe they can accomplish the task; and finally learners need a degree of relatedness which is a social factor highlighting the connections between groups and other individuals. A complex dynamic systems approach to motivation is particularly relevant here also, because such a conceptualisation of motivation tries to take into account the "ongoing multiple influences between environmental and learner factors" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 248). This is something which Ushioda (2011a) argues has long been acknowledged by practitioners, but that only recent, socio-dynamic conceptualisations of motivation have been able to take into account.

Ushioda has also examined the interdependence of autonomy and motivation in much of her work (2007, 2011b) and it forms the core rationale in her person in-context relational view of motivation (2009, 2011a) which asserts that learners be viewed as people "with particular social identities, [within] the unfolding cultural context of activity" (2009, p. 215). This underlines the rationale for the teaching reviewed in this study, which was to encourage learner reflection. This extension of the learners' locus of control was intended as a way of bridging autonomy and motivation through the reality of classroom practices that encourage reflection and ownership. Self-assessment seems the most practical and workable way of achieving such a bridge.

Self-assessment

Hattie (2008) conducted a comprehensive review of 800 meta-analyses related to education. He found that self-reported grades (a weak form of self-assessment where students simply predict their own grades and then try to achieve them) were one of the

single-most important strategies for improving student achievement. Self-report grades were found to have a significant effect size (*d* 1.44), the highest of the 138 impact factors identified (Hattie, 2008) and considerably higher than the average effect size in his study (*d* 0.40).

Despite the potential in terms of motivation and achievement, self-report and self-assessment has also been severely criticised, particularly as an accurate form of assessment. For example, Janssen-van Dieten (1989) found a disappointing lack of correlation between self-assessment scores and test scores for Dutch as a second language, which was further triangulated with teachers' ratings. Blanche (1990) reported mixed findings in his study of French learners, noting the fact that overall the students displayed an impressive ability to self-assess accurately, and yet he also noted that learners were far less able to predict their oral achievement (vocabulary and grammar) grades. Jafarpur (1991) and Babaii, Taghaddomi, and Pashmforoosh (2015) found that there was a lack of consistency between learners' self-assessments and those of the teacher, indicating that self-assessment is unreliable as a method of accurate proficiency measurement, although Butler and Lee (2010) found that such discrepancies could be reduced with learner training. Conversely, Griffee (1998) has reported a positive correlation between students' self-assessment and teachers' evaluations, particularly among higher-level learners, which is further corroborated by the meta-study of self-assessment validity conducted by Ross (1998). Heilenman (1990) tested the validity of self-assessment using positively and negatively worded questions using a split ballot paper to test response effects. She concludes that both groups still tended to over-estimate their proficiency, although this was particularly salient amongst less experienced learners. However, other findings have revealed that self-assessment scores are reliable, for example Bachman and Palmer (1989), who found self-measures to be both reliable and valid measures of communicative competence. Peirce, Swain, and Hart (1993) found a correlation, although it was admittedly a weak one. Such varied findings cast doubt on the validity of using self-assessment scores as part of learners' final course scores.

Most of the studies discussed above attempt to examine the validity and reliability of students' self-assessments of their own language ability, something which is notoriously difficult even for experts in language assessment. It is not really surprising that discrepancies exist between one type of rating and the other, and the large number of variables across each study makes direct comparison and conclusive generalisations difficult. However, all of these studies are positive about self-assessment as a tool for learning, even when they report negative correlations in their results:

> The main purpose of self-assessment, however, is not its application for selection, but its positive influence on the learning process, if applied meaningfully and trained well.
>
> (Janssen-van Dieten, 1989, p. 44)

A fundamental difference to note is that the above studies focus on student self-assessment of their language ability whereas in the current study students assess their class participation. The latter is inherently difficult to measure but students may be best situated to provide the most accurate account. Indeed, Upshur (1971) noted in one of the earliest rationales for self-assessment in language learning that students know themselves best and they have access to all of their own learning experiences, be they successes or failures. Gardner (2000) provides a sound overview of the use of self-assessment for increasing learner autonomy, concluding from the research that "reliability is an issue that needs to be kept in mind but it is not one which should prevent self-assessments from being tried" (p. 53). He goes on to suggest that teachers

might prefer to conduct their own research in the contexts in which they teach, due to the variability of the findings in the studies.

The study

The data presented here is from an on-going Exploratory Practice inquiry (for the characteristics of such enquiries see Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) into the use of self-assessment for classroom participation scores. Inductive classroom-based studies such as this rarely use questions as their starting points, tending to view the research instead as dealing with a puzzle. The central puzzle at the heart of this inquiry relates to the way autonomy and motivation manifest themselves as realities in the language classroom, and more specifically whether self-assessment is a practical and workable way of helping students to maintain motivation by enlarging their locus of control.

Context is a crucial aspect of classroom-based and Exploratory Practice research. The context of this study is a course called *Speaking Skills* which is a mandatory English-instruction course for first year university students enrolled in the Department of English Literature at Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan. The course meets twice a week for ninety minutes over a fourteen week period, for a total of forty-two hours of instruction. The students receive two courses (*Speaking 1* and *Speaking 2*) over the year, but different teachers for each semester. The aims of the course are to raise the students' English speaking ability, specifically focusing on discussions and presentations. As the department specialises in English literature, it is preferable if the content of the course also deals with literary themes, such as the analysis of published stories or poems. Teachers on the course have a flexible set of overall guidelines to follow, which allows them to design their own syllabus and focus, and even decide how to weight and grade the assignments. This high level of teacher autonomy is quite common at Sophia University and has provided an ideal opportunity for the research described here.

The assessments and weightings for the *Speaking Skills* courses which form the context for the present study are:

Attendance	10%
Class participation (self-assessed)	30%
Mini-presentation (unassessed)	0%
Individual presentation (teacher-assessed)	30%
Group presentation (teacher-assessed)	30%

It is important to note that the self-assessment for class participation (30%) is weighted the same as the teacher-assessment for each presentation assignment. In other words, the self-assessment grade carries a lot of weight in terms of the students' overall grade for the semester. Initially a marking rubric was drawn up based loosely on similar self-assessment rubrics (see, for example, Harris & McCann, 1994; Hedge, 2000). However, over the course of teaching, this rubric has been developed and at times the students have been involved in creating a new rubric, based on their own definitions of good participation. In this study, the self-assessment grid was created collaboratively with the 2014 participants, but then used again unchanged with the 2015 participants.

The rubric is divided into two sections: one for general participation and the second focussing on content specific learning. There are also two comments boxes: one for students to justify their self-awarded score and one for them to write a short-term goal, something they want to work on in order to improve as learners. The self-assessment

rubrics are administered to the class three roughly equally spaced times during the semester, roughly once each third. The first time the self-assessment is administered follows directly after the unassessed mini-presentation, the second after the assessed individual presentation, and the third near the end of the course after the group presentation has been conducted. Since the self-assessment is worth 30% of the total grade, each self-assessment session accounts for 10% of the students' overall grade. It should also be noted that other types of reflection are built into the course at strategic points. For instance, after each assignment students have to email the teacher regarding their perceived strengths and weaknesses of that work in order to unlock the teacher feedback. Class time is also frequently devoted to learner training and explaining the pedagogic rationale behind self-assessment and learner autonomy.

Sources of data

The data discussed in this paper arises from three sources. The most important source is a self-assessment grid (see appendix) which was used by students in autumn 2014 (n=26) and spring 2015 (n=26). The grids were completed in each of three phases (all within a single semester) by each student, and contained Likert and open-ended questions. The second source of data is the teacher-researcher's own detailed observations which were recorded in journal entries based on field-notes taken during lessons. This journal has not been coded or processed for analysis but provides a useful way of checking details. It is a form of narrative knowledging (Barkhuizen, 2011) which allows systematic reflection to provide a valid account of the process and raises awareness of important findings. The third source is an anonymous questionnaire completed by the students on the last day of the semester to elicit their reflections on self-assessment, with particular reference to motivation. This questionnaire coincided with returning to students their self-assessment grade for the entire course with class averages, and highest and lowest scores.

Analytical procedure

The self-assessment grid developed for this course used Likert questions ranging between 1-10 for agreement, with a set of ten statements about the students' class participation. Its reliability was checked using Cronbach's alpha test. The same grid was used three times with each group, thus giving three separate sets of responses from two different cohorts of students. Under such circumstances it is normal to run the Cronbach's Alpha test three times separately, treating the rubric as three separate tools, once for each stage of its administration.

A questionnaire can ordinarily be considered reliable if Cronbach's alpha coefficient returns a score above 0.80 (Dörnyei, 2007). The tests of the three phases each returned reliable coefficients of 0.894, 0.857 and 0.880 respectively. This indicates that the self-assessment scale (developed collaboratively with students by eliciting their responses to the question "What makes a good class participator?") can be treated as a reliable instrument for assessment, and also shows that the students' responses can be considered reliable. No cases were eliminated as outliers showing that the scale seemed agreeable to all participants. However, it should be noted that these statistical tests only prove the reliability of the rubric, not the process of self-assessment itself.

An analysis of the mean scores of the responses was cross-referenced with the teacher-researcher's field note observations and with the students' comments from both their self-assessment grids and the final questionnaires, looking for general patterns as

clues to the central 'puzzle' of the Exploratory Practice inquiry. The data were then revisited for primary and secondary coding. The findings are reported and discussed in the following section.

Analysis and results

The results of the self-assessment scores for 2014 (Table 1 and Figure 1) and for 2015 (Table 2 and Figure 2) show that students on average awarded themselves a grade of A (90<) in 2014 and B (80<) in 2015 for class participation. However, it is also notable that standard deviation appears rather high which is indicative of a fairly wide degree of variance across the sample. This suggests that learners were able to assess themselves realistically because it shows an absence of homogeneity which would have appeared if, for example, all students had awarded themselves maximum scores.

Table 1. Summary of scores for 2014 cohort

Phase	Average score /100	Highest score /100	Lowest score /100	Mode	Standard Deviation
1	88.9	100	43	90	11.1
2	91.8	100	78	90	5.8
3	91.4	100	71	94	8.3

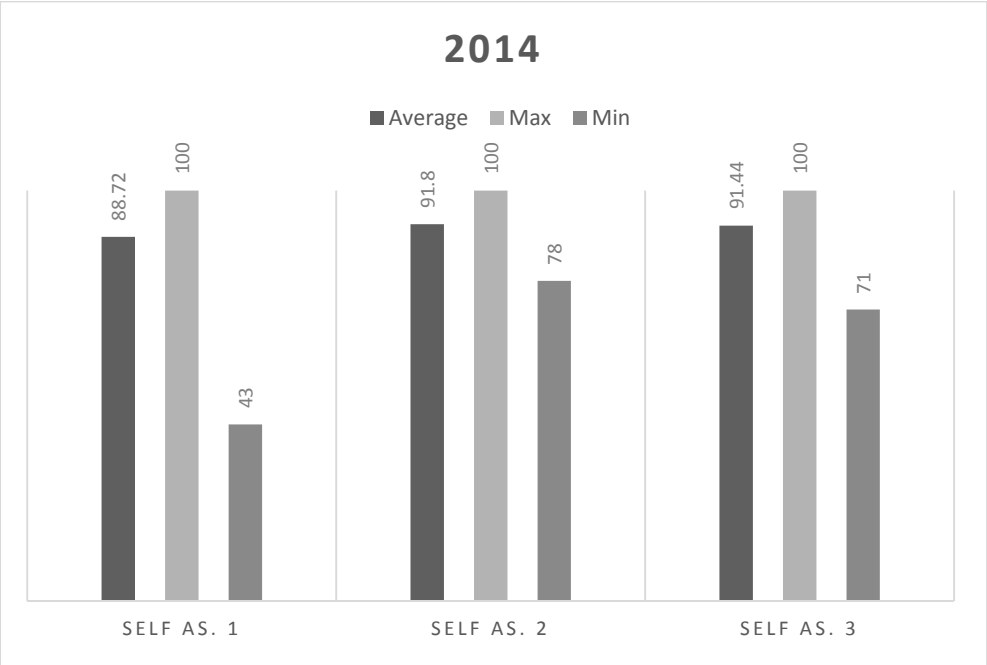

Figure 1. Self-assessment summary 2014

Table 2. Summary of scores for 2015 cohort

Phase	Average score /100	Highest score /100	Lowest score /100	Mode	Standard Deviation
1	82.2	93	66	91	8.7
2	83.8	95	64	93	8.0
3	87.2	95	70	94	6.8

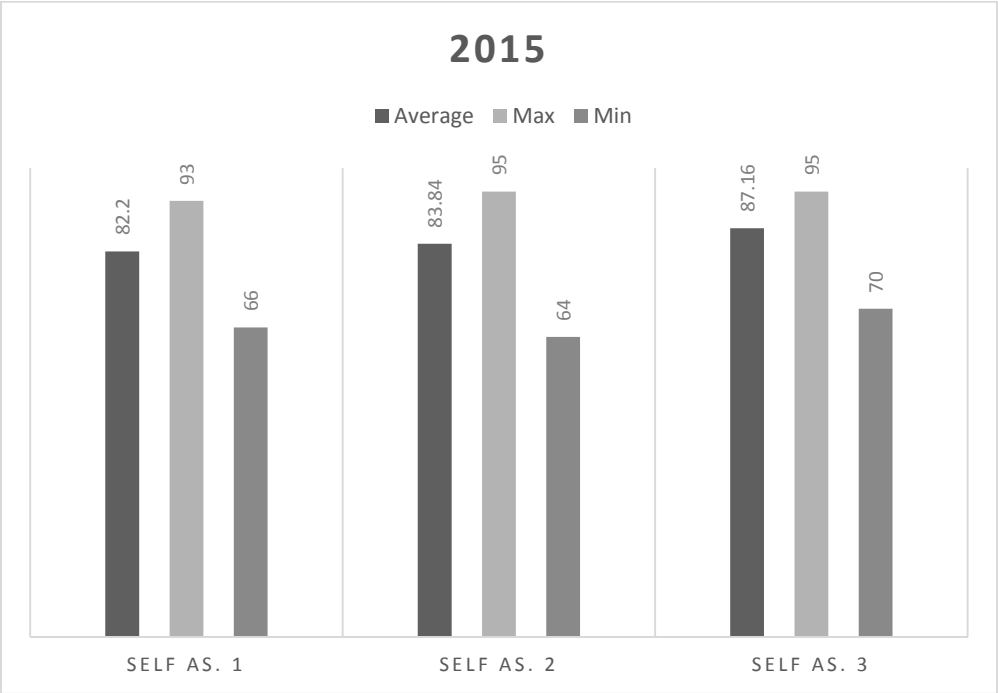

Figure 2. Self-assessment summary 2015

To illustrate the uniqueness of scoring, Figures 3 and 4 show students' individual score for each of the three self-assessments. From the graphs it is clear that whereas some students scored themselves higher in the first assessment than in the third (e.g. Students 1, 51, 52), others reversed this trend (Students 7, 27, 48), whilst others still remained constant throughout the course in their evaluations of their own participation (Students 19, 25, 31). Also worth noting are students with extreme scores, such as Student 13, who scored himself the lowest in 2014 self-assessment 1 at 43% (which is a fail grade) perhaps indicating that the student did not fully understand the system. This same student also received an F for his individual presentation. Student 13 then vastly increased his participation score for the second self-assessment to 80%, an increase of 37%. It is very reasonable to assume that this student was using the control he had over the grade as a kind of buffer, rather than his score representing a genuine increase in participation. This buffering is very likely, as, according to the field notes, Student 13 received the F for his individual presentation due to plagiarism and this in itself is

indicative of a struggling student who is not quite willing to put in the effort to achieve the required increase in performance. Other observations of this student also corroborate this, such as being frequently late or sleepy in class and seeming reticent during group-work.

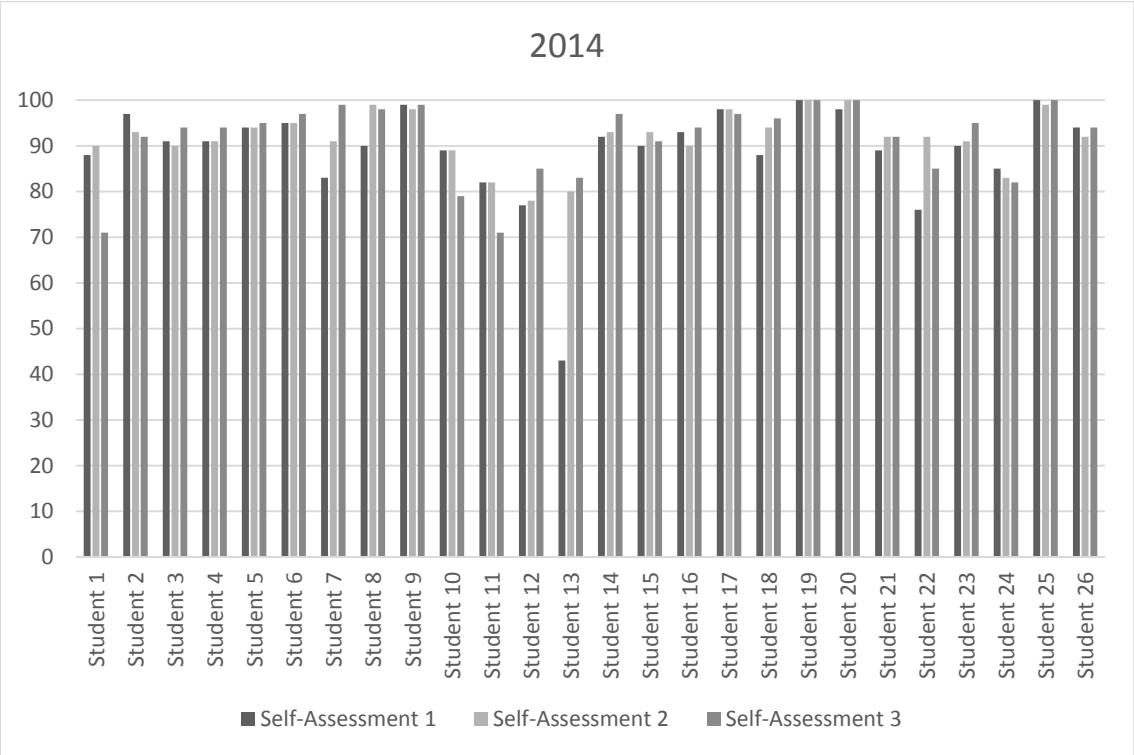

Figure 3. Graph of each student's score 2014

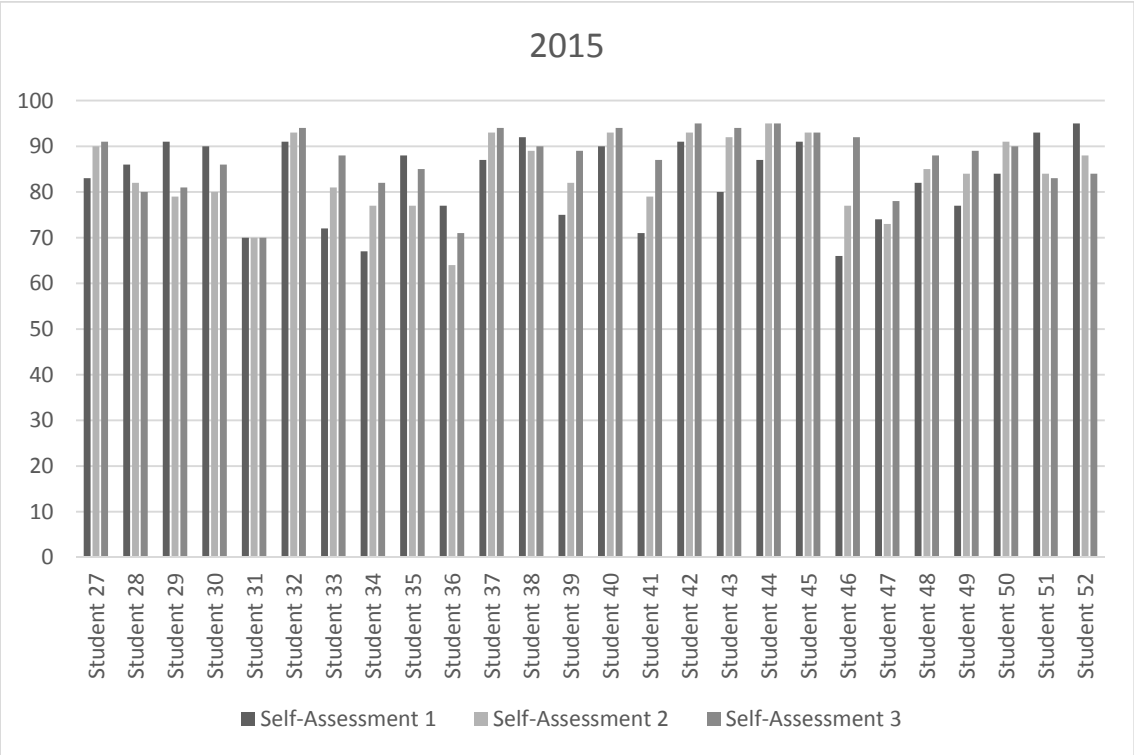

Figure 4. Graph of each student's score 2015

Figures 3 and 4 also show that students seem to be carefully considering their own participation, and generally they reflect an honest (and, by extension, accurate) grade for class-participation. The fact that students' grades often varied greatly from one assessment to another, and from one student to another, underlines the uniqueness of the students' self-scoring. The teacher-researcher's field notes about students' participation in class is largely consistent with their self-assessments. Although class-participation is not simply based on effort and does not directly equate with motivation, it seems to provide a useful window into students' reflections of their motivation and potential fluctuations during a semester.

Students' open-ended comments also suggest that using self-assessment has helped them to maintain their motivation throughout the semester and to become more aware of their participation and involvement in the learning, thus indicating more learner autonomy. For example, Student 5 in self-assessment 1 (2014) commented that "I sometimes give up explaining in English, so I will try hard to speak English when we do the group work in next one month". This same student then went on to recognise that her difficulty in expressing herself was due to a lack of vocabulary in her second self-assessment, and her final self-assessment also mentioned her goal to continue studying vocabulary, although she also seemed to regret not having made the most of her time in class to use English. Even students who had scored themselves full-marks in all their assessments, such as Student 19, showed the ability to be self-critical and identify both strengths and weaknesses in their class-participation. She noted in self-assessment 3 (2014) that she sometimes "had trouble coming up with the good phrase in English" and so she decided that she should "watch more TV shows so that my vocabulary will increase". Student 37 in self-assessment 2 (2015) also demonstrated how the self-assessment process had helped her become more conscious about her participation in class, and how this had helped her to increase her motivation to participate more actively:

> I wasn't good at expressing my opinion, giving a presentation and I didn't like it. But I tried to change my attitude. Now, I like to put my hands up to say what I thought and give a presentation to share my opinion with other people. It's a big and good change for me.

The motivation of Student 37 seems to have been spiked by some event which occurred during the course of the semester, and her self-assessment scores for participation consistently went up, from 87 in the first assessment, to 93 and then finally to 94 in the third assessment. In general, both groups gave themselves high evaluations for class-participations; however this is probably an accurate reflection since using self-assessment and engaging extensively in reflection in class generally results in consistently more effort from students.

The open-ended questionnaire administered anonymously on the last day of semester provided some interesting additional reflection from students. In answer to the question "Did doing the self-evaluation make you want to take more responsibility for your own learning?" one of the most common themes in students' responses was about being true to themselves, or not being able to deceive themselves just in order to award themselves a higher grade. This seemed to have the motivating effect of making them work harder to deserve the grade. For example:

> [Yes], because my conscience is there. I can't lie and try to make more responsibility for myself. (SZ/2014)[1]

> [S]ince I should evaluate myself honestly, I have to work harder to get good score. (SY/2014)

> As doing the self-evaluation, I could realize what I didn't do well and what I should try to improve my English language studies. (SA/2015)

Similarly, when asked if they felt it was good to be involved in the grading process, another student noted:

> Being involved in grading myself makes me try harder than the previous class. (SB/2015)

The theme returned when asked whether they decided to work harder after completing the first self-assessment:

> At first my self-assessment is so high. So I thought I have to study harder to be deserved to my self-assessment. (SC/2015)

The questionnaire was specifically themed around motivation, and when asked "Do you find it motivating to be involved in the grading process?" there was an overwhelmingly positive set of responses. Again, the theme of honesty was very common, such as the following comments:

> I was able to continue working hard on our projects in order to mark myself good grades. (SX/2014)

> [I found it motivating] because I cannot lie [to] myself. (SW/2014)

When asked about their opinion of the self-assessment process, students were generally positive although not always. Some students complained about the lack of objectivity of self-assessments, seeming to have a lot of faith in the teacher to provide a more accurate assessment. Others, however, felt the opposite, as the following comments demonstrate:

> Even if I study or work on my projects hard, there's no way I can tell my efforts to teachers except self-assessment. (SV/2014)

> [B]ecause the person who knows myself is me, I think. (SU/2014)

These comments echo Upshur's (1971) justification of self-assessment as an accurate measure since the learners know themselves best. Students also talked about the goal-setting and evaluation processes as being opportunities which for many of them seemed to bring to consciousness their own strengths and weaknesses, not just as participators but as learners in general. They often talked of their English ability and how conducting the self-assessment led them to an increased desire to work harder or at the very least continue working hard.

In summary, these students showed they were able to self-assess their own participation with a good degree of internal consistency and that the self-assessment grid was sufficiently reliable.

Conclusion

The research into self-assessment presents an unclear picture in many ways. Firstly, although it seems clear that self-assessment is a powerful tool in terms of achievement and maintaining motivation, it is not clear to what extent this method is useful as a formal type of assessment. Certainly as a summative form of assessment, it is highly

questionable, although as a formative assessment it seems to be very influential and has great potential, as Harris (1997) notes "Self-assessment produces learners who are more active and focused, and better placed to assess their own progress in terms of communication" (p. 12). Although there is a growing and convincing body of research into the use of self-assessment in terms of assessing language aptitude, there are relatively few studies that really attempt to investigate the more complex phenomena, such as autonomy and motivation, which must form the nucleus of the rationale for using self-assessment.

Being able to trust students to award themselves a score which was more or less a true indication of their own personal effort (i.e. an honest score) may be specific to the context in which this study took place. This is something that cannot be determined from the present study but is worthy of further research. One promising line of inquiry would be a comparison of perceived degrees of honesty across cultural and institutional contexts. During the four-year period of the exploratory study on which this paper is based there have been very few problems related to student dishonesty or over-estimation of themselves. Conversely, there has been an issue of students tending to mark themselves somewhat on the low side. For instance, students who had worked consistently hard throughout the semester (harder than other students awarding themselves higher grades) have been overly critical with themselves and awarded themselves a low grade. Indeed, it was this issue that prompted the introduction of a system whereby the students would be given a summary of all their scores and also a summary of the class average, highest and lowest scores so they could measure their self-score against that of the class. During this process students have the opportunity to change their grade. Even in cases where the students did seem to be abusing the system or marking themselves too highly, the students still possessed a good understanding of their actual performance, even if this was not reflected in their self-score (see Pinner, 2016 for further details).

This study is very context-dependent and unlikely to produce the same results if replicated; however it has been able to give some shape to the way autonomy and motivation manifest themselves in the language classroom, and to provide evidence that self-assessment is a good way of helping students to maintain motivation by increasing their locus of control over the assessment procedure. It also encourages reflection, which seems to make the students more effective learners and allows them the opportunity to take stock of their previous learning experiences.

Notes

1. Codes have been assigned randomly to the anonymous respondents.

About the author

Richard Pinner has been a language teacher since 2004. He is particularly interested in teacher development through Narrative Inquiry and Exploratory Practice. His research focuses on how authenticity is cultivated in language learning. He has published several articles, most recently in *Language Teaching Research*, *English Today* and *Applied Linguistics Review*. He has a forthcoming monograph in the Multilingual Matters SLA series entitled *Reconceptualising Authenticity for English as a Global Language*. He keeps a blog at uniliterate.com.

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Appendix: The Self-assessment grid

Self-assessment 1/3

Answer the questions; give yourself a score depending on how you feel you are progressing. This will be used to help calculate your grade, so be honest and don't be too hard on yourself. **1 = not at all, 10 = excellent.**

Name: _____

Std. No: _____

Date: _____

Total: /100

General Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I always try to speak English during the class as much as I can.										
I have been working actively in pair and group discussion										
I always come to class prepared										
I have been engaging with the classwork and discussions										
Overall I feel I have been doing the best I can										
TOTAL										**/50**

Speaking about Literature	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I have been reading lots of literature										
I have done lots of research about literature.										
I have been trying to engage more with other cultures										
I have been trying to express my own opinion										
I feel I have developed my overall ability to talk about literature.										
TOTAL										**/50**

Use the box below to explain why you think you deserve the grade you have assigned yourself.

Use the box below to explain what you think you should do to continue improving your speaking skills. Set yourself a goal which you can easily achieve within 1 month.