A Rough Guide to Language Awareness

For teachers of a second lan-guage (L2), the role of grammar instruction in the classroom has been a perennial subject of debate and has undergone many changes over the years. For example, the once well-respected traditional methods that relied on extensive drilling and memorization of grammar evoked a backlash in the 1970s, which resulted in new methods that excluded gram- mar instruction in favor of “natu- ral” communication in the classroom. Nevertheless, the topic of grammar remained a live issue, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, research in the classroom reported positive results for grammar instruction. Even so, the communicative methods had an enduring effect, and the traditional methods of teaching grammar did not return; instead, techniques were developed whereby students would be able to “notice” grammar, often spontaneously in the course of a com- municative lesson, and especially if the grammatical problem impeded comprehension. In this way, learners would notice and learn the pattern of grammatical rules for themselves. This new way of looking at grammar instruction has come to be known as language awareness, among other des- ignations. This article will discuss the background and rationale of language awareness, and will introduce a few of the techniques that teachers can use to help students discover grammatical relationships and improve their learn- ing of English.

The demise of traditional grammar instruction

Traditional grammar instruction, as it was commonly called, was criticized for its long-winded teacher explana- tions, its drills and drudgery, and its boring and banal exercises. In the 1970s, new teaching methods appeared that replaced grammar exer- cises with meaningful communicative environments. In general, the goal was to mirror the way a person learned his or her first language, an approach that was derived from the linguistic theories of Chomsky (1965), who pointed out that humans are endowed with a lan- guage acquisition device that enables

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that enables them to acquire whatever lan- guage they are exposed to. According to Chomsky (1965, 36), our “organ of language” extracts the rules of the target language from the data of performance, and this innate sche- ma comprises “linguistic universals,” which are part of our genetic inheritance.

Chomsky’s theories revolutionized the field of linguistics, and had a dramatic impact on language teaching as well. The basic assumption underpinning the communicative approach is that language is made in the mind and is internal, a process that generates what Chomsky (1986) refers to as I-language. This suggests that language cannot be acquired by putting learners through a series of linguistic hoops, which is the approach found in the traditional grammar book, and what Chomsky calls E-language, language external to the learner.

Based on Chomsky’s theories, “nativists,” including Krashen (1981), Prabhu (1987), and others, argued against explicit grammatical instruction in favor of the naturalistic “discov- ery” of the target language’s rule system. In the early 1980s, Krashen (1981) proclaimed that exposure to comprehensible input in a stress- free environment was the primary condition for successful L2 acquisition. However, at the same time this was being propagated, a num- ber of researchers were investigating the effect of formal instruction on L2 acquisition. Long (1983), for instance, in an extensive review of the empirical research, found that certain types of instruction did make a significant difference and hence one could no longer accept the nativist argument that the effects of grammar teaching appear to be peripheral and fragile. The reincarnation of grammar instruction

In spite of the reaction against direct gram- mar instruction, many researchers and practi- tioners continued to strongly advocate for the role of conscious learning and have produced a number of studies concluding that syntax can and should be taught, and that formal instruction makes a difference. However, even though these researchers supported grammar teaching, they also recognized that interven- tion by means of traditional exercises such as drills and slot-filling exercises, are much less effective than the communicative techniques that supplanted it.

The result was a number of do-it-yourself strategies devised by second language teachers to enable learners to analyze and internalize language rules and systems. These various tools and techniques differ considerably in their specific aims and in the manner in which they are implemented, but they all have a common purpose, which is to raise learners’ awareness of important linguistic features, to see what attributes these features share, to notice how they differ from other related fea-
Language awareness defined

Language awareness fits into this new paradigm, and is defined as “the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language” (Carter 2003, 64). Since the early 1990s, an impressive body of research shows that conscious learning (especially the kind one would characterize as language awareness) also builds interlanguage, one’s interim grammar in the mind. Interlanguage has to grow and develop; otherwise, fossilization sets in and learners may exhibit the all-too-familial symptoms of a “grammar gap” (Bourke 1989, 21). Many learners seem to experience this gap and need remedial work in order to eradicate fossilized errors. For this reason, the present author refers to language awareness as linguistic problem-solving (Bourke 1992).

Other definitions that are similar to lan- guage awareness include consciousness-raising (Rutherford 1987; Schmidt 1990; Fotos 1993; Shawcross Smith 1993); focus on form (Long 1991; Doughty and Williams 1998); grammar interpretation tasks (Ellis 1995); and form-focused instruction (Ellis 2001; Hinkel and Fotos 2002).

It should be noted that James (1998) makes a fine distinction between language awareness and consciousness-raising (CR). He suggests that language awareness is a learned ability to analyze one’s internalized language, be it the first language or that part of the L2 that one has acquired so far. In other words, it is about making implicit knowledge explicit. On the other hand, CR refers to getting explicit insight into what one does not yet know implicitly of the L2. James (1999, 260) concludes: Language awareness “is for know-ers and CR is for learners.” Rightly or wrong-ly, however, most applied linguists nowadays regard the two terms as synonymous.

Language awareness does differ from some of the above definitions in that it is wider in scope, including not only grammatical awareness but also lexical awareness, phonological awareness, and discourse awareness. In order to simplify matters, I shall refer to all of these approaches as language awareness (LA), as they have much in common and differ from traditional grammar teaching in a number of significant ways.

Differences between language awareness and traditional grammar

Language awareness does not use the same traditional techniques used to teach grammar that one finds in structural grammar books like Stannard Allen’s (1974) famous Living English Structure, Thompson and Martinet’s (1980) A Practical English Grammar, or Grav-er’s (1986) Advanced English Practice. In addi- tion, the practice that LA supports is different in kind from the exercises in traditional gram- mar books like Azar (1989), Murphy (1997), and Willis and Wright (1995).

Language awareness also contrasts sharply with the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instructional cycle, another traditional way of teaching grammar in the L2 classroom where the main focus is on controlled practice in the form of drills and various contextualized grammar exercises. The PPP cycle is based on a simplistic theory of language acquisition, namely “implanting through practice.” In contrast, the LA model is more concerned with input processing and comprehension than with practice with drills and repetition. LA is different in that it involves learners, indi- vidually or in groups, in exploratory tasks, very often on bits of language that need repair.

The differences between LA and traditional grammar teaching may be summarized as follows:

• LA is not a body of established facts about grammar, and it differs fun-damentally from the repertoire of structures and functions found in an itemized syllabus. Several researchers, notably Long (1991) and Spada (1997), regard this distinction as crucial. LA is the sum of the enabling strategies one uses to get a handle on the language system. It employs cognitive strategies, such as noticing, hypothesis testing, problem-solving, and restructuring.

• LA comes out of an initial focus on meaning. The objective is to investigate which forms are available in English to realize certain meanings, notions, and language functions. Whereas traditional grammar was a grammar of classes, LA is a grammar of meanings, functions, and form-function mapping.

• The aim of LA is to develop in the learner an awareness of and sensitivity to form, and not just to learn a long list of grammatical items. Learners have to explore structured input and develop an awareness of particular linguistic fea-tures by performing certain operations. According to Schmidt (1995), there can be learning without intention, but there can be no learning without attention.

• LA occurs by means of certain types of formal instruction or task-based learn- ing, where learners do grammar tasks in groups. It can come in many differ- ent forms and vary greatly in degree of explicitness and elaboration. It is not the same thing as practice. It is about input processing, noticing certain pat- terns or relationships, discovering rules, and noticing the difference between one’s current interlanguage and the target language system and as a result subconsciously restructuring one’s still evolving grammar system. As Schmidt (1993, 4) says, noticing is “the necessary and sufficient condition for the conver- sion of input into intake.”

• LA is multi-faceted. It goes beyond the raising of grammatical consciousness to include all linguistic components—vocabulary, morphology, phonology, and discourse. However, most of the published examples of LA relate to grammatical and lexical problems, such as exploring the grammatical devices used to express the concept of futurity, looking at the difference between the standard passive (The book was lost by Sally) and the “get” passive (I got lost).

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making sense of modal verbs, examine- ing collocation or redundancy, and other features of English.

• LA is data driven. Learners are not told the rule, but are given a set of data from which they infer the rule or generaliza- tion in their own way. They check their tentative rule against other sets of data and then see if it still holds in a number of contexts of use. Here again, by notic- ing the gap between their production and the correct target form, learners may restructure or fine-tune their con- clusion. Rules in English are seldom clear-cut, and a lot of work needs to be done on the gray areas.

Certainly, the concept of LA and related approaches have become a major new trend in second language learning. There is now extensive literature on the subject, including excellent summaries in Doughty and Williams (1998), Ellis (2001), Carter...
One way to think about language awareness is that everyone is a learner, since even teachers have to continue to explore language systems—a lifelong process. It is therefore useful to look at the following two complementary aspects of LA in the context of learning a second language.

1. The personal exploration of the L2 helps the learner find out how language works and thereby enriches and extends one's knowledge of the language. Here, one is talking about a focus on language itself. Everyone has a subconscious knowledge of the language they use, but not everyone has managed to make that internalized language explicit, by noticing and reflecting on the linguistic data all around them.

2. The other aspect of language awareness is the applied perspective, which for teachers means helping learners effectively explore, interpret, and gain greater understanding of the target language. The basic assumption here is that all learners have to be actively involved in discovering features of the language. They are not given the rule, but rather work inductively from structured input to arrive at their own understandings. It is a process-oriented approach, which includes steps of discovery, investigation, and understanding, which contrasts markedly with the traditional product-oriented approach in which one is told the rules and has to drill and memorize them, a method found even in recent grammar books for teaching purposes.

Integrating language awareness into task-based learning

There are probably dozens of effective activities in the literature that teachers can use to facilitate LA in the classroom. These activities enable the teacher to "problematize" instruction, and they allow learners to actively engage in the learning process. For this reason, they are referred to as "enabling tasks" (Bourke 2002). According to Estaire and Zanon (1994, 15), "enabling tasks act as a support for communicative tasks. Their purpose is to provide students with the necessary linguistic tools to carry out a communication task." This viewpoint ties LA to task-based learning, another major paradigm shift in the way second language is experienced in the classroom. In Willis' (1996, 101–116) task-based learning model "language focus" is the last phase in the framework. Upon completing a communicative/interactive task, students have the opportunity to explore points of language arising out of the task cycle. The language focus may consist of analysis or practice activities. Analysis consists of consciousness-raising activities in which students analyze texts, transcripts, and sets of examples in order to notice specific language points, such as:

1. Semantic concepts related to themes, notions, functions (e.g., Find and classify all the phrases referring to time.)
2. Words or parts of a word (e.g., When do we use the word any? What does it mean? Study the examples in the text.)
3. Categories of meaning or use (e.g., The word will has four categories of meaning in the text. What are they? Give an example of each category.)

Practice activities may consist of one or more of the following (Willis 1996, 110–113):

1. Unpacking and repacking a sentence
2. Repeating, reading, or completing phrases
3. Making a concordance
4. Progressive deletion from board
5. Gapped transcript
6. Dictionary work and reporting back
7. Looking up a point of grammar in a reference grammar and reporting back
8. Computer games
9. Language games
10. C-text restoration activity and follow-up discussion

The idea behind LA is that learners themselves construct their own grammar from their own language experience, and thereby either consciously or subconsciously restructure their emerging interlanguage. They need access to negative evidence, which in LA is provided by means of corrective feedback from the teacher or by looking up the problem point in a comprehensible reference grammar or dictionary.

Implementing language awareness techniques

Many other techniques, in addition to the task-based ones mentioned above, can raise learners' consciousness of the form and function of targeted grammatical items. The techniques listed below may be classed as LA and have been found to be especially useful, user-friendly, and effective. Where possible, these techniques should be sequenced as follows:

1. The student is exposed to oral or written structured input where the initial focus is on the meaning of the text.
2. The student notices the target structure and the context in which it occurs; this can include observation of syntactic patterning, judgments and discriminations, and the articulation of rules.
3. The student checks that the rule holds against further data and, if not, revises the rule.
4. The student uses the structure in a short production task.

Technique 1: Linguistic problem-solving

Any piece of language can be targeted for exploration. For instance, Hall and Foley (1990) present topics such as tense contrasts, modal verbs, conditionals, infinitives versus gerund, verb patterns, adjectives and adverbs, prepositions, and articles and determiners.

Analysis may take place at the input stage or the output stage. The task is often presented by means of "perceptual frames," i.e., a short dialogue, narrative, or expository text. The "input frames" provide a meaningful context to focus on the new language item, and sufficient data to enable the learner to make a tentative induction as to the rule or generalization. Progress along that route is speeded up by exposure to "enhanced input" and the application of cognitive strategies. Further
frames/data are then presented and the initial hypothesis is either confirmed or rejected. The problem-solving procedure involves a simple recursion, comprising three moves:
1. Read the next frame
2. Form a hypothesis
3. Test, and if necessary, revise your hypothesis

The input frames are seeded with pertinent data and are carefully sequenced to address different aspects of the problem under study. For example, in presenting the article system in English, one might look at a series of binary contrasts:
1. count vs. mass nouns
2. a versus an
3. the versus a / an
4. article versus no article

The a versus an problem might be presented to a beginning class as follows:

- Of fossilized error in a systematic manner through language awareness activities.
- Restoring C-texts

Technique 3: Restoring C-texts

The use of C-texts for measuring general language proficiency has by now become quite common. The standard C-text consists of four to six short texts which have been altered by deleting the second half of every second word and replacing it with a blank. The task is to restore the missing pieces by using a variety of conscious strategies, such as contextual inferring and analogy, among others.

The advantages of C-texts are numerous, some of the main ones being the following:
- They prime learners to discuss points of grammar or lexis on which they miscue, and thus remove some of the roadblocks to correct usage.
- Working on a C-text is like doing a puzzle—it is an enjoyable and challenging activity. (Students generally respond well to problem-solving tasks.)
- C-texts can lead learners to become aware of target language forms.
- C-texts are easy to construct and they can be calibrated quite precisely to learners’ abilities.
- Learners can self-correct the C-text and thus benefit from immediate feedback.
- C-texts sample a wide range of grammatical categories.
- C-texts are objective, easy to administer, and score.

Technique 4: Cloze procedure

The basic fixed-ratio Cloze procedure involves the systematic deletion of words from a text (such as every fifth word) for students to fill in (Oller 1973). This creates an awareness of word order, collocation, and dependency relations between elements. It is a problem-solving exercise in which the learner has to exploit linguistic clues on many fronts, not only in the linguistic context, but also in the wider context of situation. Importantly, the Cloze can be used to focus attention on specific language items if selected function words (such as pronouns, articles, and conjunctions) or inflectional morphemes (such as the past tense marker -ed or the progressive tense marker -ing) are deleted. The Cloze procedure is often used for language testing; as such, it is not without its critics.

Problem: Why are some nouns preceded by a and others by an?

Instructions: Read the passage below and underline all nouns preceded by a or an. Enter the underlined nouns in the correct column.

Passage (with solution): Molly is an awful cat. She sleeps on a mat and never catches a mouse. She eats five times a day. She often sits in an armchair for an hour or more without making a sound. Some people say she's a horrid cat, but I think she's an old rascal.

a
an
mat
armchair
mouse
hour
day
sound

This technique allows the learner to notice syntactic patterning and make judgments and discriminations about a rule. In this case, the fact that not only the nouns but intervening adjectives take indefinite articles may help the learner “notice” that the rule is based on sound.

Technique 2: Error detection and correction

Noticing is also a key process in analyzing output and is essential for error detection and correction. Making errors and having them corrected is a normal part of learning. We are told “there is no learning without making errors.” However, it is pointless to tell students to edit their work if they do not know how to edit. In many cases, they do not know the rules; if they did, there would not be errors. Student errors are a very good source of remedial work, which may focus on one particular problem, or on a number of related problems, such as looking at the form and function of narrative tenses in a piece of writing.

It is no easy task to eradicate persistent grave errors which have fossilized over many years. It may be necessary to target each case.

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prefer to use the C-text for language testing and the Cloze text for language teaching (Khoo 2002). Whatever its role as a testing tool, the Cloze procedure, and especially the selective Cloze variation, seems to possess certain merits as a teaching tool and can help learners consolidate and restructure their grammar.

Technique 5: Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is a very powerful pedagogical tool for syntactic and lexical exploitation. Moreover, it can be employed at different levels of L2 proficiency. For example, having analyzed the form and function of the present perfect tense in English, one might devise various stimulus sentences related to a current task to elicit this tense, as in this example:

Instruction: Rewrite each sentence so that it means the same, or nearly the same, as the given sentence.

Tom no longer lives in Kuching. He________________ [Answer: He has left Kuching.]

There isn’t any food left.

Abu________________ [Answer: Abu has eaten it all.]

Technique 6: Propositional cluster

Rutherford (1987, 167) defines a “propositional cluster” as a skeletal sentence consisting of an unmarked verb and its associated noun-phrases. The learner is given the discourse setting, and the task is to arrange the cluster into a well-formed sentence and to do so within the context indicated. For example:

Round the corner came a boy. ride – he (boy) – bicycle

The most natural realization of this cluster would be:

He was riding a bicycle.

The learner has to figure out which noun phrase is selected as grammatical subject, the form it takes, and the most likely type of verbal form and complementation.

Technique 7: Sentence combining

The issue of sentence combining as a teaching tool is discussed by James (1994) and Zamel (1980). Sentence combining has been and still is extensively used as a pre-writing task. It is a very effective way of raising students’ consciousness of cohesion. Some learners tend to write a string of loosely-connected sentences. For instance, in lower primary grades, one often finds a lot of redundancy in composition writing, as in the following example:

I have a cat. My cat is black. She has white paws. My cat has green eyes.

These four sentences can be more economically expressed in a single sentence:

I have a black cat with white paws and green eyes.

Sentence combining helps students to become aware of the structural changes that come into play when two or more simple sentences are combined. It covers an enormous area of English grammar, ranging from coordination to subordination and the various types of sentence connectives that signal a wide range of semantic relationships. One LA activity in this area is known as “packing” and “unpacking” sentences, which is combining two or more sentences into one, or extracting the embedded propositions from a complex sentence.

Technique 8: Grammaring

Teachers teach grammar, but learners need grammaring, which is the ability to access and use grammatical devices to make meaning. Thornbury (2001, 1) makes a distinction between making an omelette (or “omeletting”) and an omelette. Likewise, he distinguishes between doing grammar (or “grammar”) and grammar. The same idea is found in Rutherford (1987), but he refers to the process of exploiting grammatical devices as “grammaticization.”

In order to demonstrate the various ways in which a single concept is expressed, learners may be given a set of propositions and asked to indicate the many ways in which they can be “grammared.” For instance, in English the language function “contrast” is expressed in a number of ways.

A [but]

A; [however,] A [whereas]


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The focus here is to build procedural knowledge by sensitizing learners to the forms available and enabling them to select the most appropriate form for a particular context of use. Thus, in casual conversation the but option is most likely, while in formal writing the whereas option is more appropriate. (The range of options available would not be given as above, but would be inferred from a text or several texts.)

Grammaring tasks require learners to make decisions as to which grammatical devices are most appropriate to express their intended meaning. They have to ask themselves questions such as:

• “Shall I use the active or passive?”
• “Shall I use any narrative tenses, and if so, which one, and why?”
• “Shall I use coordination or subordination?”

Thornbury (2001, 81–99) offers a selection of photocopiable grammaring materials. Many of these are lexical clusters to which grammar has to be added. For example:

boy blue suit Carlos

One possible way of grammaring this set of lexical items is as follows:

The boy in the blue suit is Carlos.

Technique 9: Dictogloss

Dictogloss or Grammar Dictation is a technique that involves the teacher and students in communicative interaction, text reconstruction, and error analysis. There are four stages in the procedure:

1. Preparation—the learner finds out about the topic of the text and is prepared for some of the vocabulary.
Technique 10: Language games

All language learners enjoy an element of fun and inventiveness, and language games have long been part and parcel of second language teaching and learning (Rinvolumu 1984; Rinvolumu and Davis 1995). One can easily devise game-like activities to elicit and use a particular pattern. For instance, the pair-work games such Describe and Draw. Spot the Difference, and Board Rush are popular with young learners, while older learners seem to enjoy word games, puzzles, and problem-solving scenarios. The same kind of game can be used in different ways to focus on language items, or real interaction. For example, an information-gap activity about zoo animals might focus on the present progressive (e.g., Abu is feeding the zebra), while a communicative version might require each participant to talk freely about the animals. One can find many stimulating games that focus on the language system, for instance, the discovery activities in Hall and Shepheard’s (1991) The Anti-grammar Grammar Book.

Many of the techniques outlined above have been around for the past 10 to 20 years. Some of them focus on input processing, while others focus on output processing. Language awareness is, therefore, any technique or combination of techniques that enable learners to understand how a piece of language works. Far from being a new concept, it is often a matter of putting old wine into new bottles.

Conclusion

One of the great challenges for second language teachers has been the implementation of procedures that help learners process comprehensible input while at the same time giving them opportunities for language awareness. In other words, effective second language teaching requires input processing (acquisition) combined with focus on form (learning). It matters not whether we call the new process-oriented approach language awareness, or consciousness-raising, or linguistic problem-solving. Language is no longer seen as a fixed inventory of structures prescribed by an itemized syllabus but as a dynamic process in which learners themselves are actively involved. According to Nunan (1998, 140), an “organic” approach to language teaching:

- offers a set of choices
- provides opportunities for learners to explore grammatical and discoursal relationships in authentic data
- makes the form/function relationships transparent
- encourages learners to become active explorers of language
- encourages learners to explore relationships between grammar and discourse
- offers a set of choices

In summary, then, language awareness has to do with the raising of learners’ awareness of features of the target language. Its point of departure is input processing, exploring examples of language in context, noticing salient points and patterns, and constructing a rule and testing it against further data. But that is only half the story. It is equally important to allow and require learners to outperform their newly acquired grammar, or as Nunan (1998, 108) says, “for learners to press their grammatical resources into communicative use.”

Research on LA is still in its infancy, and it is probably too soon to say which forms may be most effective with different groups of learners. However, we now have a large body of empirical evidence supporting the inductive problem-solving route to linguistic knowledge. Hence, the teacher’s role is no longer that of “great guru”—or “all knowing one”—but that of the facilitator of learning.

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Using Self-assessment for Evaluation

SELF-ASSESSMENT APPEARED TO COME OF AGE IN 1980 WITH THE publication of a Council of Europe text on the topic (Oskarsson 1980). Since then, more and more programmes around the world have attempted to integrate self-assessment into the learning and evaluation process, with varying degrees of success. The usefulness of self-assessment for learning purposes seems to be widely accepted, as illustrated by the widespread use of learner diaries. Self-assessment for evaluation purposes, however, is far less common, and many teachers actively resist its implementation. This situation is due, in part, to the ways in which self-assessment is frequently conducted. In this paper, I will argue that learners can conduct reliable, global self-assessment, and I will suggest three ways in which such data-driven self-assessment can be done.

1. I am using assessment as a broad term for all attempts to gain information concerning learners’ performance and ability, regardless of the purpose. Evaluation, in contrast, is used for those attempts that produce quantitative data that are used to generate scores measuring the learners’ performance and ability.

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Purposes of self-assessment

Several reasons for using self-assessment have been suggested including:

• Self-assessment is a prerequisite for a self-directed learner. If a goal of learning is for learners to be self-sufficient and independent in language use, then training and experience in self-assessment are needed.

• Self-assessment can raise learners’ awareness of language, effective ways of learning, and their own performance and needs.

• Self-assessment increases motivation and goal orientation in learning.

• Some aspects of language learning, such as effort and learner beliefs, can only be assessed through self-assessment.

• Self-assessment can reduce the teacher’s workload.

The first four reasons clearly suggest that self-assessment can be integrated into courses for learning purposes. Less clear, however, is whether these reasons imply that self-assessment should be used as part of the input in generating a learner’s score for a course. This depends on the objectives of the course. For final evaluations of learners’ performance on a course to be valid, the evaluations should match the course objectives. If the objectives include increased motivation, positive attitudes towards English, and greater independence and awareness, for example, then self-assessment should be seriously considered as a potential part of the overall evaluation for a course. Most teachers, however, strongly resist such a move, arguing that self-assessment is subjective, unreliable, open to cheating, and more reflective of the learner’s self-image than actual performance and ability. Such an attitude is at least partially due to the nature and characteristics of existing self-assessment instruments.

Self-assessment instruments

Some self-assessment instruments, while powerful when used for learning purposes, are inappropriate for evaluation purposes. These include learner diaries; the task-based self-assessment instruments of Tudor (1996) by which learners are encouraged to analyse various aspects of their learning, such as their difficulties in completing a task; and the critical incidents in learning of Singh (1998). These instruments are very subjective—indeed, subjectivity is the raison d’être of critical incidents—and produce qualitative information that cannot be converted into scores for evaluation purposes.

Self-assessment instruments that produce quantitative information that can be used for evaluation purposes fall into two categories: global self-assessments and self-marking instruments.

Global self-assessment

It is in the area of global self-assessment that Oskarsson’s (1980) work is most influential. Oskarsson suggested that global self-assessments could be conducted through rating scales and checklists. However, both of these, as Oskarsson suggests, are very problematic. To illustrate this, here are example questions used to measure learners’ speaking ability:

• Give yourself a rating for your speaking skills on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 means I am completely fluent in English and 0 means I cannot speak English at all.

• Can you ask someone to help you to arrange an appointment with a doctor?

• Can you express sympathy using phrases like I am sorry to hear that?
At face value, these questions may seem fairly straightforward. But if we were to apply Oskarsson’s question format to teaching, we would produce questions such as:

- Can you explain the meaning of behave?
- Can you give clear instructions for a jigsaw reading activity?

As a teacher, your reaction to the first of these is likely to be a complete lack of confidence in your answer. Maybe, like me, you just plumped for a number in the middle of the range. For all of the items, you also probably feel that your answer depends on the teaching situation. I’d have no problem explaining behave to my postgraduate students, but I wouldn’t even attempt an explaination with a class of undisciplined kids on a Monday evening. In fact, it may even seem unfair to ask items like these.

Yet these are exactly the sort of items learners are faced with in Oskarsson’s questions promoting self-assessment of speaking and in other instruments for global self-assessment.

The most obvious and widely-used learning instrument that could be used as input for self-assessment is the portfolio. A portfolio is “a purposeful collection of students’ work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas” (Genesee and Upshur 1996:99). Since the portfolio is evidence to learners of their own efforts, progress, and achievements, it is suitable for self-assessment. To use a portfolio as self-assessment for evaluation purposes, questions to guide the self-assessment must be provided. Sample questions could include the following:

- To what extent did you achieve your goals in learning during this course?
- To what extent did you improve your reading ability?
- To what extent has your confidence in using English improved?
- To what extent has your knowledge of vocabulary improved? List the new words you have learnt from your portfolio.
- To what extent did you improve your reading? List some of the problems you faced while reading and how you solved those problems.
- To what extent has your confidence in using English improved? By referring to their portfolios in answering.

To increase reliability, self-assessment on open-ended tasks needs to be clearly guided by detailed scoring criteria. The easiest way to generate such criteria is to break down the task into smaller components. For example, for a letter-writing task, the finished product could be self-marked for how well it follows the standard letter-writing conventions, such as introducing the purpose of the letter in the first paragraph, assigning each topic to a separate paragraph, and so on. The close guidance of scoring criteria such as these is likely to increase the reliability of the learner’s self-assessment, making it more palatable for inclusion in the final score for a course.

For more open-ended tasks, where there may be a very large number of possible answers, self-marking is more problematic. One example of how self-marking may be conducted is given by Gardner and Miller (1999). In their example, the task is to skim a newspaper and then listen to the news on the radio. Learners then give themselves two marks: one for their understanding of the main ideas of the news, and one for their understanding of details. This self-assessment task serves a useful learning purpose by highlighting areas in which learners need to do further work, but the marks from the self-assessment are hardly reliable enough to persuade most teachers to include them as part of the final score for a course.

The use of objective tasks and detailed scoring criteria for self-marking, as described above, are restricted to self-assessment of particular tasks. Such self-assessment may be included in the overall score for a course. However, it can provide only a snapshot of a learner’s performance. To obtain a measurement of a learner’s development throughout a course, self-assessment at a more global level is needed.

The usual approaches to global self-assessment, such as those of Oskarsson, are, as we have seen, fraught with problems. Divorced from any real-world performance, they end up as very subjective and unreliable guesses that are unsuitable as components of a final score. What is needed is some way to directly relate a learner’s performance to his or her global self-assessment to make that self-assessment more reliable and more reflective of actual performance and ability.

A key question in designing global self-assessments, therefore, is how they can be directly related to learners’ experiences. At the task level, the process of completing the task and the finished product provide a clear focus for and input into self-assessment. For global self-assessments at, say, the level of course, what things could be used as data driving the self-assessment?
Pre- and post-course writing

A second way of conducting data-driven, rather than intuition-driven, global self-assessment is to use the time-honoured research technique of pre- and post-tests. Learners can be asked to write two essays about their attitudes towards learning English, one at the start and another at the end of the course. Comparing the two, learners are able to see the extent of their development through the course. With guiding questions, learners’ perceptions of their own development based on the pre- and post-course writing can provide self-assessment that can be used for evaluation purposes. The two pieces of writing can also be self-marked for certain language points. Whereas self-marking instruments applied to a given task provide a snapshot of the learner’s performance at a given moment in a course, a comparison of self-marking on pre- and post-course writing can give a clear indication of the learner’s development and improvement throughout the course.

Learner contracts

A third potential instrument for global self-assessment is the learner contract (e.g., Dickinson 1987). At the start of a course, learners identify two or three goals they want to achieve in the course, tasks and materials that can be used to reach these goals, and ways of measuring the extent to which the goals have been reached. For example, a learner may decide to increase his or her speed in reading. The learner can then identify some texts with comprehension questions to be used as practice and set a target level of achievement, such as an increase in reading speed of 50 words per minute while retaining a minimum of 70% for comprehension questions answered correctly. A learner contract, then, provides an organised series of tasks throughout a course and makes attaining specific goals an integral part of the learning process. The choice of goals in learner contracts can be left to the learner or can be controlled by the teacher to match the objectives of the course. In the latter case, self-assessment in learner contracts can be used as a valid part of the overall evaluation of learners in the course.

Conclusion

At present, self-assessment is a valuable tool in the teacher’s repertoire of techniques that enhance learning. If its uses are to be extended to include evaluation, self-assessment needs to be set up in such a way as to overcome the resistance of teachers. In this article, I have suggested that this can be done by basing self-assessment on concrete evidence of the learner’s performance and by giving guidelines on how to conduct the self-assessment. In these ways, self-assessment can become more reliable and fulfill an important role in providing learner input into evaluation for a course.

References


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