



**Self-Assessment Implementation in Writing Skills among 8th Graders of a Public
School in Ecuador**

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Is the Ecuadorian education system ready to start the culture of formative assessment in classrooms? Duvall and Angelo (2014) confirmed that this type of assessment is “a powerful tool for moving student learning forward” (Jamrus & Razali, 2019, p. 64), and students’ assessment plays an important role in it, “especially in measuring the students’ progress in learning” (Jamrus & Razali, 2019, p. 64). Self-assessment induces students to reflect on their own learning and efforts which promotes learning-deepening metacognitive processes (Gehring, 2017). However, in Ecuadorian public schools, applying formative and self-assessment is an unusual thought. Most teachers do not work on these aspects when planning and delivering classes.

Formative and self- assessment highlight what learners need in order to support their learning process regarding the development of skills. Productive skills tend to be harder to develop in EFL learners, and learners in this study certainly require support with their writing skills. They found it difficult to keep basic patterns in sentences, as well as choosing suitable words. This innovation project seeks to examine the effect of the implementation of self- assessment on writing skills’ scores. It is anticipated that the implementation of self-assessment in English language lessons will improve students’ grades on writing among 8th graders of a public school.

Literature Review

This innovation project is based on key concepts of EFL theories. Backward design was used in the lesson planning. Meanwhile, formative assessment, authentic assessment, and self- assessment were essential for the development of instruction and activities throughout the unit. Feedback worked along with rubric grading. This section will define and share features of each one of them.

Backward design focuses on designing the learning goals first, rather than the learning activities or strategies. Thus, in backward design, teachers start planning having in mind learners' outcomes (Bowen, 2017; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). "Rather than creating assessments near the conclusion of a unit of study, this backward approach supports the idea of operationalizing our goals or standards in terms of assessment evidence as we begin to plan a unit or course" (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 2). Teachers must establish at the beginning of the unit what they want to see their students achieve by the end of the period.

Formative assessment helps to identify what learners need support on during the learning process. It contributes to having more independent learners (Trumbull & Lash, 2013). Thomas (2019) shared some approaches to deliver formative assessment:

1. Entry and exit slips: Those marginal minutes at the beginning and end of class can provide some great opportunities to find out what kids remember.
2. Low-stakes quizzes and polls
3. Dipsticks: These can be things like asking students to write a letter explaining a key idea to a friend.
4. Interview assessments: it refers to discussion-based assessment methods like casual chats.
5. Methods that incorporate art
6. Misconceptions and errors
7. Self-assessment (paras. 4-20).

Wride (2017) agreed with this last element and affirmed that it "is a valuable approach to supporting student learning when used formatively and is one of the most important skills that students require for future professional development and life-long learning, as it develops their capacity to be assessors of learning" (p.1).

Authentic assessment refers to having students work on task based on performance that reflects real-life situations (Wiggins, 1990; 2002). Authentic tasks designed for this type of assessment

require a high-quality product or performance, and a justification of the solutions to problems encountered. They should be known in advance to students as much as possible. They are tied to real-world contexts and constraints; require the student to “do” the subject. They are integrated challenges in which a range of skills and knowledge must be used in coordination. They involve complex tasks that for which there may be no right answer, and that may not be easily scored. They are iterative; contain recurring tasks. They provide usable diagnostic information about students’ skills and knowledge (Indiana University Bloomington, 2022, table 1)

Thawabieh (2017) and Wride (2017) defined self-assessment as the learner involvement in assessing their own performance and learning outcomes. The researcher Naeini (2011) examined the impact of self-assessment on language skills and concluded that it “encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning and it acted as a booster for language skills” (p. 1225). Andrade (1999) shared “a list of characteristics of instruction that promote the development of self-assessment skills” (p.7). Some of them are:

- Awareness of the Value of Self-assessment.
- Modeling. It is a well-known instructional technique in which learners learn by observing an expert engaging in a desired behavior.
- Mediation (p. 7-8). In order for students to become competent at self-monitoring, it is necessary for the teacher to act as a mediator, assisting

students in the regulation and assessment of their thinking (Price, 1991, as cited in Andrade 1999).

Heidarian (2016) investigated the effect of using self-assessment on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing. Twenty-five students used self-assessment for their writing tasks. Results demonstrated that students improved their writing outcomes. Hasanah (2015) also examined the use of self-assessment in writing skills. An experimental group implemented self-assessment in their assignments and the results obtained confirmed the effectiveness of self-assessment to improve writing skills.

However, there are some limitations to consider, for instance, it is a subjective process. Therefore, students may not be completely sincere and assign higher grades while evaluating themselves. Also, it is a time-consuming task, and the criteria might be difficult for students to handle (Chan, 2010).

Feedback and assessment are closely related. Feedback is "information about how learners are doing in their efforts to reach a goal" (Wiggins, 2012, paras. 4). During formative assessment, learners must have "sufficient assessed tasks to capture sufficient study time" as well as "often enough feedback and in enough detail" (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, pp. 12, 17). Feedback is meant to be received as soon as possible, allowing students to reflect on and modify their work accordingly (Wiggins, 2012). Identifying what learners did right is as important as identifying where they need improvement (Doughney, 2014; Wiggins, 2012).

The benefits of applying formative assessment are well-known in which authentic assessment and self-assessment play a significant role. Backward design provides the perfect scenario for assessment and feedback to take place embodying the features presented above. These concepts begin answering the research question: does the implementation of self-assessment improve students' writing grades on English

language lessons among 8th graders of a public school? The final results will be analyzed later on.

Innovation

The lesson plan kept the backward design. The topic of the unit was 'healthy lifestyles'. It was planned to cover a four-week unit. There were two class periods of 35 minutes each. Students had to write emails to give recommendations on how to keep a healthy lifestyle. Therefore, they received emails from family members and friends who shared their health situation and asked them for recommendations.

The transfer goal was to have students learn email/ letter phrases and structure, organization of ideas, vocabulary related to healthy lifestyles and health problems, imperatives, and modal verbs, how to state a problem and provide solutions related to healthy lifestyles, so that on their own and in the long run, they would be able to write about matters of personal relevance using simple words and basic expressions. Students replied to one email each week and were instructed on how to use the checklist for self-assessment of their work. The first email they replied was the pretest and the last one was the posttest. The checklist was used for self-assessment every email they wrote.

Students had to use their email accounts, or their parents' accounts. There were some of them who had no access to the internet, so they wrote all mails in their portfolios keeping the email structure. All visual and reading material were prepared ahead based on the books given by the Ministry of Education of Ecuador for eighth graders.

During week one, students shared their own ideas about how to keep a healthy lifestyle whether in English or Spanish. They observed pictures related to the topic and matched them with suitable words. A grammar chart about imperatives was analyzed

and students received instructions on how to use the checklist, the email they had to reply to, and parameters to write an email.

During week two, an article from a science magazine about health problems was read with a focus on vocabulary. Students worked on identifying illnesses, symptoms, causes and recommendations. A grammar chart about modal verbs and how they were used in the article was examined and the teacher modeled how to use modal verbs to make recommendations in complete sentences. The second email is introduced. A review on how to reply to an email took place.

During week three, students read medical histories, and gave instructions and recommendations for each patient. They role-played the scene in pairs. The third email that students had to reply to was introduced.

On the fourth week, students listened to a nutritionist talking about healthy lifestyles. Students worked on a chart to indicate bad habits and positive changes the nutritionist mentioned. Students worked on a letter to the school authority to make positive changes in the food that is available in the school. The fourth and last email that students had to reply to was introduced. The full lesson plan is in Appendix 1.

Research Methodology

This project sought to benefit from the reflective nature in which action research is developed. Burns (2010) claimed that “action research is related to the ideas of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘the teacher as researcher’ which involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring one’s own teaching contexts” (p. 2). Dick (2001) explained what Action Research is by defining each term:

Action is a change methodology and research methodology within a single process. It seeks to bring about change — the action — in such a way that more understanding is developed as a parallel out-come. It pursues understanding —

the research — in ways which allow the action to be based upon a better understanding of the situation (p. 2).

Therefore, the research question: does the implementation of self-assessment improve students' writing grades on scientific lessons among 8th graders of a public school? shaped this study. Students used a checklist for self-assessment which results turned into numbers for analysis. The rubric applied by the teacher provided quantitative information as well. This information is displayed in average scores to analyze relationships between their self-assessment and the quantitative data taken from the grades the teacher obtained using the rubrics. At the same time, the rubric was used to examine the pretest and posttest.

Participants

Participants were eighth graders from a public school in the urban area of Guayaquil, Ecuador. They were between 11 to 13 years old with an A1 CEFR level. The implementation of the study was directed to the whole class of 30 students. However, 10 of the 30 students completed the pretest and posttest activities designed. Therefore, the final sample size went from 30 to 10 students. Four of them are male and 6 of them are female. Their mother tongue is Spanish. They come from low-income families.

Instruments

In the pretest and posttest, students wrote emails to family and friends to make recommendations about how to keep a healthy lifestyle. They implemented self-assessment in both stages through a checklist. "A checklist spells out what needs to be included in a piece of work" (Center for Responsive Schools, Inc. 2018, p. 157), which becomes a guide for students that can be applied to every stage of their tasks. They had a list with five statements and three columns to tick according to how they self-assessed

their work. The five statements described the three categories for evaluating writing skills: language, content and organization based on the topic and objective of the lesson. On the columns, there were three options: yes, sometimes, and not yet. All statements started with “I can...”, for example: “I can use imperatives to write about healthy lifestyles”; “I can use modal verbs to make recommendations about healthy lifestyles.” The full checklist is in Appendix 2.

The pretest and posttest emails were evaluated using rubrics. “A rubric is an assessment tool that clearly indicates achievement criteria across all the components of any kind of student work, from written to oral to visual” (Center for teaching Excellence, 2021, paras. 3), and students’ emails were graded based on the rubric that covered language, content, and organization as the basic categories of writing skills. It kept a scale of 0 to 5, with zero being the lowest score and five being the highest score. Descriptors were developed for each category according to the score. The full rubric is in Appendix 3. The rubric meets the criteria provided by Cambridge Assessment English department (2018) to assess writing skills and it was vetted by an expert in the field at Universidad Casa Grande.

Data Analysis

To answer the research question: Does the implementation of self-assessment improve students’ writing grades on scientific lessons among 8th graders of a public school?, a paired-sample *t*-test was delivered. The paired-sample *t*-test allows for a comparison of pretest and posttest between a single student’s scores to be completed in each writing category. The analysis was done in Microsoft Excel using the Analytics Tools Pack.

Ethical Considerations

This project was ruled by ethical guidelines to assure the well-being of all persons involved in it. “Research ethics matter for scientific integrity, human rights and dignity, and collaboration between science and society. These principles make sure that participation in studies is voluntary, informed, and safe for research subjects” (Bhandari, 2021, paras. 5), that is why the anonymity of all participants is kept, and an informed consent was granted as Zeni (1998) suggested. Communication with authorities and parents was permanent. Participants were free to withdraw from the research at any stage.

Results

To examine the research question, does the implementation of self-assessment improve students’ writing grades on scientific lessons among 8th Graders of a public school?, a paired-sample *t*-test was employed on the rubric scores. In a paired-sample *t*-test, the null hypothesis is that there is no difference between dependent groups. The paired-sample *t*-test identified a statistical difference between pretest and posttest scores ($t = 3.20, p = 0.01$). The test indicated support for the alternative hypothesis. Descriptive statistics were run which results are displayed in table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Based on the Rubric

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	10	4.00	5.00	4.60	0.40976
Posttest	10	4.67	5.00	4.87	0.17213
Valid N (listwise)	10				

Students’ self-assessment score was correlated with their pre-test and post-test rubric scores. The correlation between pretest rubric scores and self-assessment showed

a strong positive association ($r = .75$). Furthermore, students' posttest rubric scores and self-assessment scores showed a positive association too ($r = .61$).

On the pretest self-assessment, there was a trend among students to assign themselves lower scores than what the rubrics revealed. This tendency changed by the end of the unit with the posttest evaluation in which self-assessment and teacher's scores were alike. In other words, students were more conscious of their own work and not only showed improvement, but also their self-assessment became more accurate.

Discussion

Findings from the study revealed that the implementation of self-assessment improved students' grades on writing. The outcomes of students, as well as the assessment were planned before the activities as Bowen (2017), Wiggins and McTighe (1998) explained a backward design of a unit should be. Students assessed themselves using the checklist which made them be more independent learners as Trumbull and Lash (2013) asserted. They did not require a teacher by their side monitoring their work since they had the instrument and received previous guidance on how to use it.

As Thomas (2019) said, self-assessment and dipsticks tasks contributed to create a formative assessing environment in which they had the chance to receive and apply not only the feedback from the teacher that identified what learners did right as well as where they needed improvement (Doughney, 2014; Wiggins, 2012), but also what they had reflected from their own assessment throughout the unit. Students read and understood short emails from people who asked for recommendations to keep a healthy lifestyle. They replied to these emails giving recommendations following grammar patterns and email's structure. They had to reply to different emails four times, so they performed real-life recurring tasks as Wiggins (1990) and Indiana University Bloomington (2022) suggested to keep and provide authentic assessment.

Students assessed themselves from the beginning of the unit, so they made their own judgments of their work (Thawabieh 2017; Wride, 2017) which helped them to perform highly from the start as the pretest scores revealed. Self- assessment fostered students to take greater accountability of their own learning as Naeini (2011) mentioned which resulted in “a booster for language skills” (Naeini, 2011, p. 1225).

Chan (2010) pointed out that subjectivity might be one of the limitations in self-assessment. In the pretest, students graded themselves below the scores assigned by the teacher. However, students’ and teacher’s grades were alike by the posttest.

Conclusions

The implementation of self-assessment in this unit, based on the paired-sample *t*-test, improved students’ writing grades. Even though scores were close to the highest grade on the pretest evaluation, and there was not much space for improvement in grades at the posttest evaluation, positive changes in grades were observed. Probably, the use of the self-assessment checklist gave students guidance on what they were expected to do from the beginning, which contributed to keep a high-level performance throughout the whole unit.

Limitations

At the beginning of the design of this project, it was expected to implement the backward unit in a face-to-face class. However, it had to be readjusted to the local circumstances related to the pandemic, and the unit was taught via online. The sample was reduced more than it was expected, mainly because it was not possible to keep all students developing the tasks on the time planned. It would have been interesting to see how students that could not be part of this study, assess themselves. In the future, a study that includes those students in the group sample might be conducted.

Recommendations

The pandemic can disrupt researchers' plans since unexpected circumstances may take place. Therefore, it is suggested that researchers think of alternatives to reach the study goals. It is recommendable to keep communication with students to ignite their interest in participating in the study. In this way, desertion can be minimized. Moreover, it would be useful to know students' perspectives and thoughts on the new approach implemented for researchers to make decisions timely.

Information on students' thoughts about the self-assessment process would be beneficial to make decisions and help them use it permanently in their future tasks and performances. This analysis would be valuable to support a more formative assessment culture in the classroom. Therefore, future studies would focus on how useful students think the checklist for self-assessment was.

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Appendix 1

Lesson plan.

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Checklist

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

E-portafolio

Available upon request.