

DISCOVERING LANGUAGE STRATEGIES THROUGH SELF-ASSESSMENT: STUDENTS BECOMING INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

Eleni Saltourides
University of Arizona

This action research study investigated the effect learner-centered assessment had on young adults learning Modern Greek as a foreign language in a post-secondary setting. Specifically, it investigated how self-assessment affected their perception of their language abilities in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The study grew out of a need to create a more learner-centered classroom at the university level and to promote independent learning. For a six-week period, students in a second-semester Modern Greek language class were asked to self-assess their writing, reading, listening, and speaking abilities given open-ended questions and rubrics for each language skill. At the end of the six week period, all the participants were given a survey about their self-assessment experiences and asked to reflect how it affected them. The quantified answers of the Likert-type questions as well as a discourse analysis of the open-ended question on the survey show that the majority of students had become more aware of their learning strategies and that they would continue to use self-assessment in their future coursework, particularly Modern Greek. As a result of implementing self-assessment in the curriculum, learner activities in the class also changed by becoming more communicative and more learner-centered thus fitting under the social constructivist paradigm of learning.

INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty years, education in the U.S. has been experiencing a paradigm shift from teacher to student-centered teaching (Geeslin, 2003). While the traditional lecture, question-and-answer approach to teaching has not been shown to be ineffective, other less conventional approaches, that is, methods involving a student-centered approach, have shown to be more effective (Huba & Freed, 2000). As with anything that involves a radical shift from what is traditionally followed, implementing a student-centered approach has been slow, has not been uniformly spread, and has been hindered by superceding forces such as governmental policies that put a strain on how teachers and schools should structure their curricula (Nieto, 2002).

Indeed, teachers admittedly do feel more comfortable teaching the way they were taught, reasoning that if the teacher-centered method worked for them, it can work for others (Huba & Freed, 2000). Moreover, the teacher-centered method makes it easier to design lessons, and is viewed as the fastest way to impart knowledge, especially when teachers are under pressure to cover a large amount of material (Huba & Freed, 2000). As I grew as an educator, I realized

that I, too, was teaching under the traditional paradigm of teacher-centered learning, and while I have made many modifications to include all learner styles, I was acutely aware that I had been teaching in a teacher-centered mode. Since most of the undergraduate students at the research 1 university enjoyed my classes and gave me very positive teacher evaluations at the end of each semester, I did not feel I had an urgent incentive to implement student-centered pedagogy in my courses. However, as a reflective educator, I knew I could help my students learn more if I shifted my attention towards them as learners.

The underlying impetus for wanting to implement a student-centered classroom was the disparaging comments I heard from a colleague who teaches second-year Modern Greek (MG). For several years, my colleague confided how disappointed she felt with the second-year students' proficiency level, performance, and competence in MG. I was disturbed to hear this since I was the one who had taught these same students as first year students. I realized that even though I might have been getting positive evaluations from my first-year students, at some point I was doing them a great disservice by adhering to a teacher-centered and teacher-directed approach. Upon closer reflection, I recognized that these second-year students had not developed strategies that made them more proactive in their own learning. Candlin (2001) points out that language learning requires learners "to become independent and to display positive attitudes towards language learning" (p. 232). I did not do anything in my largely teacher-centered classroom to promote independent learning among my former students, thus partly contributing to their lack of preparedness for second-year coursework. Of course there were many other variables such as aptitude, motivation, affective filter, and personal situations that could also be factored into their lack of preparedness; however, being able to focus on one variable—meta-cognitive knowledge—was something worth investigating.

What was also made clear from this realization was that just because students like a class or the instructor does not mean that either or both are effective. While the second-year instructor was not blaming me for her students' ill-preparedness for second-year MG, I felt partly responsible for their lack of preparedness for intermediate-level work. I then began to seriously consider my present class of first-year MG students, the majority of whom are bright, well-mannered, and motivated. I knew that the time had come to put into action what I had been feeling guilty about. Intuitively, I knew that I needed to shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Learner-centered assessment is a term synonymous with authentic assessment, which takes on the form of performance assessment, portfolios, and student self-assessment (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Student self-assessment was the focus of this study since learner-centered teaching has many facets (Weimer, 2002). This area would serve as a starting point in the gradual and total implementation of learner-centered practices in future semesters. By having students evaluate their own work on a consistent and

frequent basis, they could think more about their work rather than waiting for the teacher to tell them what is and is not good about it. Self-assessment tasks would allow them to have more control over their learning and to continue their learning outside of the MG class. The research questions that informed this study include the following:

1. How does learner-centered assessment influence the way students view their developing language proficiency?
2. How do students' attitudes change towards language learning using this type of assessment?

As the study progressed, it was noticed that the way the entire class was run as a result of integrating daily self-assessment had noticeably changed compared to before the study was started, thus prompting the third question:

3. How is instruction in the language classroom affected when space is provided for student self-assessment?

Focus was put on beginning language learners of MG to see whether or not learner-centered assessment would help them become more independent learners who are acutely and constantly aware of their language strengths and weaknesses.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The main goal of colleges and universities is “to help students learn more effectively and efficiently than they could on their own” (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 3). Angelo and Cross advocate that classroom teachers collect frequent feedback on students' learning and conduct action research so that “they [can] learn about how students learn...[and] how students respond to particular teaching approaches” (p. 3). They further maintain that using Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs), which they lay out in their book as based in the authentic assessment tradition, “help instructors help students become more effective, self-assessing, self-directed learners” with a focus on improving learning, not teaching (p. 4). These pedagogical perspectives are one of my goals for students and the impetus for this study.

Frequent self-assessment comes under the umbrella of learner-centered classrooms (Huba & Freed, 2000). The progressive shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered classrooms has posed new challenges to foreign language instructors in college settings (Geeslin, 2003). Geeslin explains that language teachers must find ways to “include students in the process of setting goals and taking responsibility for learning outcomes while at the same time maintaining a consistent curriculum” (p. 857). The road to independent learning begins when a constructive dialogue between instructor and student takes place in which instructional goals for individual assignments are made part of the classroom dialogue. Additional benefits of self-assessment include student involvement in the learning process, learner autonomy, increased motivation, development of study skills, and a fostering of life-long learning (Geeslin, 2003; Wenden, 2001; Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Student self-assessment in non-language courses has been studied

empirically with mixed results (Weimer, 2002). In their meta-analysis of forty-eight studies about student assessment, Falchikov & Boud (1989) showed that in an entry-level required course, self-assessments did not work because students were too preoccupied with grades and consequently inflated their grades and reflections in order to pass a course. In upper-level courses, it consistently worked. However, since then, Kardash (2000) found that students in lower-level classes were capable of assessing their own work and that their scores showed striking similarities with what their instructor had given them. The MG class in this study was an entry-level, required course, and yet all the students were motivated to study MG. Dornyei (2001) argues that no-matter the level of the course, motivation plays a big role in how successful students are at self-assessing their performances.

Student self-assessment plays an important role in self-regulated learning or learning that is accomplished by the strategic efforts of students. The concept of self-regulated learning is central to the way students become independent learners (Wenden, 2001). Self-regulated learners “monitor their own performance and evaluate their progress and accomplishments” (O’Malley & Valdez, 1996, p. 5). When students self-regulate, they “have control over their learning, they can decide how to use the resources available to them within or outside the classroom” (p. 5).

Self-regulation is closely tied to meta-cognitive knowledge or the “specialized portion of a learner’s acquired knowledge base” (Wenden, 2001, p. 45). Research on the effects of meta-cognitive knowledge has been scant. Citing examples from her previous research on meta-cognitive knowledge and its effect on language learning, Wenden concludes that meta-cognitive knowledge is required for pre-planning of a task and for monitoring a task which results in its eventual completion. She points out that meta-cognitive knowledge is yet another variable that influences the process of language learning. Meta-cognitive knowledge underlies learning strategies, which are “the techniques or procedures that facilitate a learning task” (Chamot, 2001, p. 25). Wenden (2001) points out that meta-cognitive knowledge is essential to using learning strategies. Oxford (1990), who has done extensive research on learning strategies, states that “meta-cognitive strategies help learners to regulate their own cognition and to focus, plan, and evaluate their progress as they move toward communicative competence” (p. 8). In order to progress in the study, students’ learning strategies were looked at, which were in turn accessed through their meta-cognitive knowledge of language. Their self-assessment was a portal to their meta-cognitive knowledge about language which was helping them use learning strategies. In the course of the study, students were asked to talk about their learning strategies in order to encourage them to tap into their meta-cognitive knowledge about language.

Self-assessment fits nicely into a sociocultural theoretical framework in that it involves interaction between student and teacher in the mediation and co-construction of the student’s language knowledge (Donato, 2000). Self-assessment allows for the teacher to track and monitor what the student actually understands and leaves room for a dialogue to occur between student

and teacher. Instead of evaluation being unidirectional (as under the traditional paradigm), self-assessment allows for a bi-directional flow of information in which both teacher and student are involved in the progress of that student's learning (Donato, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This teacher research study took place in a second-semester MG language class at a large southwestern university over a six-week period in Spring 2004. The majority of participants were undergraduates ranging in ages from 18 to 36. There were a total of 10 participants in this class, 8 females and 2 males. Two of the students were non-degree seeking students, a male who was 27 and a female who was 36. Out of the nine students, five were of Greek-American heritage in which either one or both of their parents speak Greek. However, all of them were third-generation Greek-Americans who wanted to re-connect and/or strengthen their ties with their heritage culture and language. The remaining five students professed an interest in learning Greek because of any one or all of the following reasons: 1) they had been to Greece, 2) they love Greek culture, 3) they plan to visit and/or study in Greece, or 4) they wanted to take a different language. I taught all these students in Fall 2003, and they seemed to feel very comfortable with me.

Setting

The class met four hours a week in a well-lit classroom with three whiteboards, an overhead projector and TV/VCR unit. Once a week, the class met in a state-of-the-art language lab where students used the recording program *Audacity* to record their spoken interactions, reading, and other listening and speaking exercises.

While the curriculum for this course purported to use the communicative approach to language teaching, the day-to-day structure of the class largely did not follow this approach. It is awkward for the researcher to describe how rigidly teacher-centered her classroom actually was before the instigation of the teacher research project. For instance, there had been few opportunities afforded to the students to really practice their communication skills since the teacher acted as a transmitter of knowledge. Thus, most of the classes were lecture-style where students took a lot of notes. Partner-work occurred but mostly to complete exercises and not to collaboratively co-construct language. There was a quiz given every week on content covered in class. The quizzes were usually discrete-point grammar and structure questions or they were straight recall of vocabulary. From time to time there were listening comprehension parts to these questions where a question in Greek would be asked and students would respond in writing to the questions either in Greek or English depending on their level. From time to time, there was a communicative activity like an information gap, but because the teacher had to create the materials for such exercises, they were not used as frequently because it took time to make them (the textbooks for this course were poorly

designed and did not offer much in terms of communicative activities). The book was used as a guide to structure the themes of what would be taught. Any role-playing activities were usually planned ahead of time and pre-scripted and practiced in class.

The traditional midterm and final for this class tested discrete-point grammar structures. The test also included a vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing section that did not assess communicative competency even though part of the course description was that it was taught using the communicative approach. For written assignments, students were never given a rubric so that they knew what they would be assessed on. Their work was graded on their final product—it was never asked of them to rewrite their paragraphs. There was no process-based syllabus. Their written work was graded based on the teacher's holistic, intuitive perceptions. When they spoke in class, rubrics were never used but instead speaking was assessed according to what "sounded" right. There were never any systematically kept records of students in terms of how their language was progressing. Quizzes, a midterm, and a final formed the major basis of their assessment for their work in class. Despite this type of teaching style, students claimed to enjoy this class because of the dynamic and energetic personality of the teacher (this was revealed in teacher evaluation comments and in personal emails to the teacher).

It was not until the implementation of the present research study that not only changed the entire organization of the class drastically, but also changed the amount of teacher-created materials produced in order to collect meaningful data from students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This action-research project was a pilot study to determine the efficacy of self-assessment and its use in future MG language courses. During the course of the semester, students were given self-assessment rubrics specifically designed for the reading, listening, speaking and writing assignment/task they were given on any given day. Sometimes they would complete the assessment rubrics in class and other times they were asked to assess their work as an out-of-class assignment. At the end of the six-week study, students were given a Likert-type survey (see Appendix A) asking them to reflect on their intensive self-assessment of their work in the class.

For this study, the primary source data used for the data analysis was the survey. Specifically, this survey asked them to rate themselves on how they changed as language learners as a result of self-assessment and whether or not they felt they were more aware of their language abilities. Included in the survey was an open-ended question asking students to reflect on their overall experiences with self-assessment over the past six weeks. As secondary source data, teacher-generated assignments (see Appendix B) were created after the midterm/Spring Break, the time which the research study began. These assignments were used to answer how the class had changed as a result of implementing frequent self-assessment in the language classroom.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the end-of-project survey data, a mixed-methods approach was used. The results of the Likert-type survey taken by 9 of the 10 participants were quantified and analyzed according to frequency of choice (frequency distribution). The results are posted in the tables below. Text analysis was used for the open-ended question in which reoccurring themes emerging from the data were categorized in an iterative, multiple-checked process to the point of data saturation, that is, until no more categories or disconfirming evidence could be derived from the data.

A descriptive analysis of the various assignments and activities created in order to implement frequent self-assessment was also examined to see how the course changed with the implementation of consistent self-assessment. These comprised the secondary source data for this study. Finally, the results of the qualitative analysis from the open-ended question and the descriptive analysis of the classroom assignments and activities were then compared with the results of the quantitative analysis in order to draw connections between the two types of analyses and to strengthen any conclusions from all data sets.

FINDINGS

1. Findings from Survey

The following results were collected at the end of the six-week study which was also the end of the semester. Nine of the ten participants responded to the survey. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the survey sections, highlighting the major trends in the data.

Table 1.1 Perception of overall language ability in the four language skill areas at the end of the six-week study:

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Writing		2	1	<u>6</u>	
Reading			<u>5</u>	3	1
Speaking		2	<u>5</u>	2	
Listening	1	2	<u>3</u>	2	1

The reason a space was provided on the survey to respond to these questions was to get a sense of how students felt their skills were at the end of one year of studying MG. Unfortunately, it cannot be determined how much of these perceptions of language abilities are a direct result of frequent

self-assessment and changing the class structure and activities, but at least they give the reader a sense of how the participants view their language abilities. What was surprising was that the majority of students felt that they had good speaking ability, with two students choosing “very good” to describe it. The students’ perception of their speaking ability, which is one of the last and usually most difficult skills to master, was in agreement with the teacher-researcher’s assessment. While the reason for their positive perception of their speaking ability is difficult to ascertain based on the given data set, the increased amount of meaningful speaking opportunities in class in the last six weeks of the semester could be the reason behind their responses to this category because they felt they were given more opportunities to talk more in class. This result represented a major accomplishment in this language classroom, which was previously reading and writing centered. Not one of the previous first-year Greek courses taught by the researcher had nearly as good speaking ability as the students in this study. On the other hand, other confounding factors such as language aptitude, motivation, and prior knowledge of the language could have also affected the interpretation of this result. Nevertheless, both Greek-Americans and non-Greek-Americans felt comfortable in their speaking abilities in this class, which is a positive outcome.

Not surprisingly, 6 of the 9 students felt their writing was very good. Writing was usually one of the skills that was first mastered in my teacher-centered classroom because the primary focus was on grammar, vocabulary, and accuracy of structures. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the participants felt confident in their writing abilities. Reading was also focused upon in my teacher-centered classroom and is one of the first skills that students learned in the first semester of MG study, therefore explaining the positive results. There was no high frequency in any one category under listening ability. Upon reflection, their lower perception of their listening skills may be the result of little opportunity for auditory input. The use of Greek throughout class was not consistent, and when it was used, many of the students still wanted the translation of what was said.

Table 1.2 Evaluation of Self-Assessment Experience, questions 1-14 results.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I enjoy learning Greek						2	<u>7</u>
2. Greek is a difficult language to learn	1				2	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
3. Before the midterm, I never thought about the learning strategies I used	2		2	1	2	1	1

when learning another language							
4. Before this class, I never used self-assessment to reflect upon my current level of ability in any given subject	1	2	1		1	<u>3</u>	1
5. After the midterm, I am much more aware of how I go about learning another language	1				<u>4</u>	3	1
6. Consistent self-assessment of my reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills this past month are responsible for how I feel in #5	1				<u>4</u>	3	1
7. I found that the online discussions on POLIS were the most helpful in making me aware of my language ability	1	1		<u>4</u>	1	1	1
8. I felt comfortable using POLIS for discussion				1		<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
9. I prefer to use POLIS to self-assess rather than other forms of self-assessment		1		<u>3</u>	2	<u>3</u>	
10. Overall, self-assessment was a positive experience for me					2	<u>4</u>	3
11. The experience of self-assessment was not helpful to my language growth	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>			1		
12. I feel that the way the class was run changed since self-assessment was integrated after the midterm				1	2	1	<u>5</u>
13. I feel the activities done both in class and in the language lab have had a positive effect on my language growth since the						<u>5</u>	4

implementation of the self-assessment exercises.							
14. I will continue to use self-assessment independently for my Greek and other subjects in the future.					<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>

The tabulations in table 2 are the frequency results for each token statement on the survey. For each statement, the number which shows the highest frequency in the rating of that token was underlined. The shaded areas are questions pertaining to how students felt about self-assessment, how they viewed their language ability as a result of self-assessment, and how they feel the class structure changed because of frequent self-assessment.

For token statement #3, “Before the midterm, I never thought about the learning strategies I used when learning another language,” there was no salient point of high frequency, but rather an even distribution across the categories. For token statement #5, “I am much more aware of how I go about learning another language,” 8 of the 9 participants agreed with the statement, which is a positive outcome. Token statement #6, “Consistent self-assessment of my reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills this past month are responsible for how I feel in number #5,” also resulted in a positive outcome with 8 of the 9 students agreeing that self-assessment helped them become more meta-cognitively cognizant of their language abilities. Further down in token statement #11, 8 of the 9 participants strongly felt that self-assessment was helpful to their language growth. For token statement #14, all the participants agreed that they would continue to engage in the process of self-reflection, which is another positive outcome and hints towards the emergence of independent learners who take charge of their own learning.

Token statements #12 and #13 dealt specifically with students’ perceptions of whether or not the class structure changed and whether the changed class structure contributed to their language growth, respectively. Five students strongly agreed with #12, two somewhat agreed, one agreed and one was neutral. Five students agreed and four strongly agreed with statement #13. These positive relationships indicate that the implementation of self-assessment calls for different learning activities to take place. Based on their responses, students enjoyed the activities that were created in order to facilitate self-assessment. The activities in this class became more communicative and authentic in nature and, thus, more enjoyable to the students.

2. Findings from Open-Ended Responses

The following are the results of the content analysis of the open-ended question in the survey. The narrative of the descriptive analysis of the assignments and activities for this class are presented as secondary source data

to show the way the course had changed as a result of self-assessment practices. Finally, the qualitative and quantitative results are then compared in section 2.3.

2.1 Content Analysis of open-ended Question on the survey analyzed by thematic categories

The question is reprinted below:

Reflect on your overall experiences in doing self-assessment and whether or not it had a positive or null effect on your language abilities. Be as descriptive and detailed as possible.

Helped/Helpful

Five of the nine participants indicated the self-assessment activities were helpful to them, but they all indicated slightly different reasons why they thought they were helpful. One participant stated that “Self-assessment really helped [her] to decipher what [she] really needed help with” by showing her “exactly where [she] was having trouble.” Two other students indicated that self-assessment helped them with their language abilities: “I can see where I need to improve, and take steps accordingly to better my language abilities” and “...it helped with my language abilities tremendously.”

Another student indicated that self-assessment was helpful because it prevented her from “getting lazy about [her] language abilities.” She states, “I was constantly having to check myself.” Yet another participant indicated that it was most helpful in her assessment of listening and speaking skills in terms of the vocabulary she used: “When I started assessing my listening skills, it made me start to think of other ways that I could improve my listening skills. Now I listen for key words that I know and then I get a better idea of what the person is saying...which is much more effective for me.”

Strengths and Weaknesses

Two students indicated that the act of self-assessing allowed them to distinguish between their strengths and weaknesses. One student stated that “It allows you to identify your strengths so you know what you are best at and can use it to your benefit, and it allows you to identify your weaknesses so you know what needs the most work and attention.” This student pointed to how it helped in her writing. The other, non-traditional student explained how it made her see the strengths and weakness of her speaking ability. This student connected her experience in this class with self-assessment of another class that required her to self-assess. She was able “to go back and assess [her] weak and strong points, and make a true assessment.”

Accuracy

One student indicated that self-assessment “allows you to see what mistakes you made so you know what to be more cautious about the next time when writing.” This student saw self-assessment not only as helping her with grammar mistakes, but particularly with writing. Another student also viewed

self-assessment as a means to help her with her grammar mistakes in speaking, particularly gender agreement among nouns and adjectives. A third participant also saw self-assessment benefiting her in her speaking abilities saying that it “did help me realize more solidly my problems with oral communication” and it allowed me to “focus on some of my errors.”

Time Factor

Four of the participants talked about the issue of time in doing self-assessments, in which three of the females agreed and the only male participant in the survey offered the opposite opinion (about the time factor). One participant explained, “I believe if I had more time in the day to focus on this dynamic, yet difficult language, I would learn much more and assess myself in higher standards.” For her, self-assessment was not as helpful to her language growth simply because she felt she did not have enough time to devote to it. The second participant admitted, “Even though I was kind of grumpy about the time it took to do self-assessment, it was actually helpful to me.” She later continues to give her opinion on how self-assessment could be better implemented in the language classroom: “I feel it would be an even more helpful look if instead of being given so intensively, we were maybe given one self-assessment assignment at the end of every week throughout the semester...Having it be so grouped up at one time was a little frustrating.” As a result of the intense self-assessment activities, she admitted to “slack a bit in [her] Greek homework.” The third student also brought up the issue of self-assessment being time consuming suggesting that “Maybe having a little less formal self-assessments would still achieve its goal and also allow enough time for studying.”

On the other hand, the fourth participant argued that self-assessment is worth the time it takes. He acknowledged that “Students will often complain self-assessment takes time away from the act of studying,” but then counters the argument saying, “For me, self-assessment has never taken time away from my studying, but has always enhanced it.”

Confidence/Depression

Two students alluded to how self-assessments manifested either two conditions—confidence or depression. Self-assessment produced confidence because students saw how successful they could be at a particular language skill(s). On the other hand, these participants saw self-assessment as causing depression because it made them realize their weaknesses or failures. One student who was talking about her self-evaluation of her midterm in another class explained that “this approach lifted [her] confidence towards the subject.” However, her struggle with the Greek language throughout the year had made the self-assessment process a negative experience for her because it pointed to her failures or weaknesses as a student which decreased her motivation to learn.

The other student explicitly made references to confidence and depression brought about by self-assessment. He argued, “The act of self-assessment produces two things in people, confidence or depression. Of

these states of mind, one is harder to overcome than the other.” He then made some very astute observations about the possible disadvantages of self-assessment. In his statement below, the student does not mean depression in the literal sense, but just to illustrate that:

...when students become too confident in themselves; in the respect the confidence has sacrificed the comprehension of fundamentals. The confidence should be recognized, but it is not the bigger of the two conditions. The depression is what should be noticed more closely, since depression often courts discouragement. Since self-assessment can cause depression by exposing failure, some students become frustrated and discouraged.

He is making the point that self-assessment may lead to too much confidence which might make the student lose his/her concentration in learning the language. On the other hand, self-assessment can lead to a lot of anxiety and frustration which results in the student’s possible withdrawal from the class, or lessening of studying for the class. He opposed the idea of self-assessment used as a way of teaching “to determine where the responsibility lies concerning the welfare of the student.”

He continued his reflection by pointing out the ethical problem in asking students to grade themselves, an issue brought up by Weimer (2002). He is alluding to the fact that at several points in the six-week period, I had asked students to grade their own work and compare their grades with the grade I had given them. If the grade they gave for themselves was far different from mine, I had asked them to defend themselves and if they convinced me, I would change the grade. The male participant, however, was offended by this task, arguing that any person could learn on his/her own but when he/she goes to school, that person has chosen to have the assistance of a guide to learn the subject. He argues that “if that guide is repeatedly telling the person to grade himself, what good is the guide? Probably about as good as a mayonnaise milkshake.” He continues by saying, “I could see students becoming irritated if they are not receiving much input from the person who is supposed to be guiding them.” Such comments come from conceptualizing how the classroom is run through a teacher-centered paradigm of teaching where the teachers are viewed as the sole authority of knowledge and students have no say in how they feel they are learning (Huba & Freed, 2000).

Despite his reservations about self-assessment, as a mature and intellectual individual (he was older than his classmates), he used it constantly in all his learning endeavors. His issue with it stems from his belief that young students, just barely adults, are perhaps not mature enough to appropriately use self-assessments in a productive manner. While past studies have shown this trend (Falchikov & Boud, 1989), the results garnered from this class show the opposite.

2.2 Descriptive analysis of classroom Assignments and Activities given during six-week study

When this teacher research project was first implemented, there was no

indication of the radical changes that would take place as a result of having students frequently assess themselves. I had rationalized that because I was so fully entrenched in the teacher-centered paradigm, the easiest entry into a learner-centered paradigm was to have students start assessing their own work. What became immediately apparent after the first week of the study is that I had to come up with lesson plans and activities that would promote spaces in the curriculum for students to assess their own work. Lecturing most of the time in class could not inspire self-assessment because the student is not actively involved in the learning process.

One of the first assignments students did under this new paradigm, and which was never done before in this class, was to have them read their written work to each other and see if the listener could understand what was being read. This proved to be an engaging exercise for the students because it involved active co-construction and negotiation of meaning in the language they were trying to communicate in, which fits well with sociocultural theory. Other activities had them talking in Greek for one or two minutes about their weekends with a partner and then having them change partners to do the same thing again. This allowed students to actively and authentically communicate orally and reinforce structures every time they were confronted with a new partner. In this activity, it was also required that students ask each other questions to make it a truly bilateral mode of communication rather than just having one person explain what they did over the weekend. Students were all engaged and earnestly trying to come up with the language to communicate their experiences—both high and low language performers seemed to be engaged in this task.

However, the activity and subsequent assignments that really made an impression on students were the weekly visit to the language lab and the use of *Audacity*, an audio-digital recording program on the computers. Before the study, students were never taken to the language lab because generally what was done in the language lab could have easily been replicated in the classroom, thus leaving both student and teacher unsatisfied; for example, completing on-line grammar exercises. When inquiring about the different programs that the computers had to promote language learning, I came across the *Audacity* program which opened many opportunities for me and the students. I found myself constructing creative, authentic, and contextually based activities that acted as an extension of what was covered in the book.

For example, students were asked to pair up at the computer stations and do a spontaneous role-play in which one person would act as the “seller” of their house and the other would act as the “buyer” (see Appendix B). As they were talking, I asked them to record themselves on *Audacity* and repeat the process with reversed roles. They would then save their recordings and email the mp3 sound file to themselves. I gave them listening and speaking rubrics, either borrowed from self-assessment books or teacher generated to fill out that evening at home after they had a chance to listen and reflect on their speaking and listening skills. In addition, open-ended questions were also given and built into these language labs in the “Homework” section. These were included to

stimulate more in-depth thinking about their learning abilities. While it took a few weeks to get these language labs to run smoothly, it was beneficial in the end.

Finally, the nature of writing assignments also changed within the course of this six-week study. As mentioned earlier, students only had to write a final product and hand it in for a grade. However, since I wanted students to reflect more about their writing abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, I found myself creating elaborate process-based assignments in which I did not collect their first draft but instead had students conduct anonymous peer reviews based on a writing rubric and open-ended questions. It took well-thought out planning to come up with such an assignment, but in the end, it allowed students to take the time to reflect not only on their own writing, but on others' and to measure their abilities against their peers. This was something that was never considered in my teacher-centered classroom.

Overall, all these activities and assignments described above point to a radical shift in teaching style and the structure of the class. I originally had not expected that the way I ran my classroom would change that much; however, implementing student self-assessments required that the teaching be learner-centered as well. While it was much more work than the way I had been teaching before, as an instructor it was a gratifying and enlightening experience.

2.3 Connections between qualitative and quantitative sections

The purpose of this section is to point out connections among the quantitative and qualitative results described above. The majority of the class viewed their speaking and writing skills as “good” to “very good” on the survey and this corresponds to student responses on the open-ended question, where several pointed out how much more they noticed their strengths and weaknesses in these areas. What is interesting to note is that in my teacher-centered classes, the productive skills of speaking and writing seemed harder to acquire than the receptive skills of reading and listening. However, using more communicative and learner-centered activities stimulated and developed these productive skills. Similarly, their noticing of their listening/speaking abilities was influenced by the lessons in the language labs, which focused solely on these skills, thus showing how authentic, communicative activities lend themselves to authentic assessment.

Another connection in the data is the positive results on token statements #12 and #13 dealing with how the class structure had changed since the implementation of self-assessment activities and the descriptive analysis of the way the class was run. While I noticed this change, I wanted to see in the surveys if the students had, and they did see a change in the way the class was conducted.

In Table 2, there was repeatedly an outlier among all 14 token statements that veered away from the majority of the participants' responses. These were all the responses of the male student who is older, more mature, and a highly intellectual individual. He did not see any real significant change in his learning growth because he explained that self-assessment was not a novelty to

him.

No mention was made in any of the open-ended reflections about learning strategies even though they were asked about in the survey and they had been prompted to describe their learning strategies in a previous assignment. Their open-ended reflections mainly focused on awareness of language abilities in terms of surface problems like accuracy. Since five of the participants agreed that they never used self-assessment to reflect on their ability (token statement #4), it is not surprising that they still focused on surface errors rather than going into a deeper analysis of their experience as did the male participant who strongly disagreed about never having used self-assessment before this study. However, this male student was a very independent learner and studied Greek on his own, going far ahead in the book from where the class presently was. This illustrates the connection between self-assessment and meta-cognitive knowledge, which trains students not only to be acutely aware of their learning processes, but also teaches them to learn independently because of their newfound awareness of their language abilities.

DISCUSSION

This study was instigated in order to encourage and develop independent learners in a foreign language, university-based classroom. Learner-centered assessment falls under the umbrella of learner-centered teaching and is an ideal place to begin for those who cannot adhere to learner-centered teaching all of the time due to external, oppositional factors. However, this study shows that if university instructors want to implement systematized self-assessment in their classrooms, they must be prepared to change the way they teach, depending on how deeply steeped they are in the teacher-centered paradigm. Implementing self-assessment changes pedagogical tasks and activities in class. What occurred in my classroom is that the activities became situated in a process-based syllabus whereas before, the activities centered on a product-based syllabus.

Another point to consider is the spacing of self-assessments. Since this study was conducted in a short period of time, students were inundated with many types of self-assessments which, as some students pointed out, was overwhelming and took away from quality time studying. Implementing self-assessments should be done at a more moderate manner and spaced out more evenly.

While some students had reservations about the amount of time it took to complete self-assessments and the time it took away from actual studying of the language, most conceded that they would continue to self-assess, albeit in a very informal manner in order to further their language growth. The majority of participants felt self-assessment was important to their language growth and their reflections point to students who are starting to look at their language problems and to try to fix them on their own. This indicates that they are on the road to becoming lifelong independent learners, or as Wenden (2001) and O'Malley & Valdez Pierce (1996) call them self-regulating learners. Angelo &

Cross (1993) point out that “if they are to become independent, lifelong learners, students must learn to take full responsibility for their learning” and that authentic assessments like self-assessments “can provide information to guide them in making those adjustments” (p. 4). Moreover, the results of this study support Skehan’s (1998) argument that “reflection represents the learner developing some degree of self-awareness in learning, and shows how a given learner may appreciate his or her strengths and weaknesses” (p. 265). The intensive and daily self-assessments of all aspects of their work in their language class seemed to promote independent learning despite the abbreviated duration of the study.

Many students pointed out that they were more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and appreciated that they were made aware so that they could try to fix their mistakes. This is much different from before, when their written work was corrected and given back to them with a final grade. In this case, students looked at their mistakes, but because they themselves were not asked to find and correct them, the teacher’s corrections did not make them aware that they needed to work on those mistakes. They were dependent on teacher feedback rather than being dependent on themselves and being responsible for their own language development. While six weeks is not sufficient time to fully instill students with the benefits of self-assessment, their intensive use of these assessments certainly jump-started their sense of language awareness.

Developing independent learners was one of the initial goals when embarking on this teacher research study. In order to keep track of their progress and to follow up on whether or not they will continue to self-assess, a longitudinal study that follows their progress in their second-year MG courses would have been ideal. Moreover, a follow-up was needed with the second-year language MG instructor to see if they were better prepared for intermediate work than their predecessors.

The implications of this study further contribute to language educators’ understanding of what learner-centered assessment is, how it can be implemented, and what the advantages and disadvantages of using it are. This study is also useful to educators across the curriculum in secondary and post-secondary institutions who would like to use more learner-centered approaches in their day-to-day activities.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study shed some light on how foreign language educators can develop students’ awareness of their learning at the university level and on how educators in general who want to help their students be more autonomous and independent learners. As the teaching paradigm shifts to a more social constructivist, learner-centered approach, it is important to allow students to assess themselves. Self-assessment fits into the process-approach to learning where *how* learning occurs is emphasized over *what* is produced. The process of self-assessment allows students to become proactive learners, who are in full control of their learning. Teacher-centered teaching only manages to

produce docile, dependent learners who are only interested in grades and not what is learned. On the other hand, embracing a student-centered paradigm where daily student self-assessment is implemented leads to a radical change or shift in teaching style. These changes included the kinds of assignments produced and the creative and different class activities designed for this particular class. These are the valuable lessons learned from this teacher research project.

REFERENCES

- Angelo, T. A. & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Candlin, C. N. (2001). Afterword: Taking the curriculum to task. In M. Bygate, P. Skehan, and M. Swain (Eds.), *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing* (pp. 229-243). New York: Longman.
- Chamot, A. U. (2001). The role of learning strategies in second language acquisition. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning* (pp. 25-43). Harlow, England: Longman.
- Donato, R. (2000). Sociocultural contributions to understanding the foreign and second language classroom. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 27-50). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Falchikov, N., & Boud, D. (1989). Student self-assessment in higher education: A meta-analysis, *Review of Higher Education Research*, 59 (4), 395-430.
- Geeslin, K. L. (2003). Student Self-assessment in the foreign language Classroom: The place of authentic assessment instruments in the Spanish language classroom, *Hispania*, 86 (4), 857-868.
- Huba, M. E. & Freed, J.E. (2000). *Learner-centered assessment on college campuses*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kardash, C. M. (2000). Evaluation of an undergraduate research experience: Perception of interns and their faculty members, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92 (1), 191-201.
- Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- O'Malley, J. M. & Vadez Pierce, L. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners: Practical approaches for teachers*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House Publishers.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press.

Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wenden, A. L. (2001). Metacognitive knowledge in SLA: The neglected variable. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning* (pp. 44-64). Harlow, England: Longman.

Eleni Saltourides is a third year doctoral student in the Second Language Acquisition and Teaching Program at the University of Arizona. She is currently working on her dissertation on adult immigrants and their use of technology in a technology-centered ESL classroom. Her research interests include technology integration in foreign/second language classrooms, social identity and language learning, and fossilization phenomena.

Appendix A

End-of-Project Survey On Self-Assessment of Language Skills

Sex: _____ Major: _____

A. Please rate your writing ability in Greek.

Poor fair good very good excellent

Please rate your reading ability in Greek.

Poor f air good very good excellent

Please rate your speaking ability in Greek.

Poor fair good very good excellent

Please rate your listening ability in Greek.

Poor fair good very good excellent

B. Please circle the appropriate number-meaning representation for each question asked below:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	neutral	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree

1. I enjoy learning Greek 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. Greek is a difficult language to learn 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Before the midterm, I never thought about the learning strategies I used when learning another language 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Before this class, I never used self-assessment to reflect upon my current level of ability in any given subject 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. After the midterm, I am much more aware of how I go about learning another language 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. Consistent self-assessment of my reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills this past month are responsible for how I feel in #5 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. I found that the online discussions on POLIS were the most helpful in making me aware of my language abilities. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. I felt comfortable using POLIS for discussion. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. I prefer to use POLIS to self-assess rather than other forms of self-assessment. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. Overall, self-assessment was a positive experience for me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. The experience of self-assessment was not helpful to my language growth. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12. I feel that the way the class was run changed since self-assessment was integrated after the midterm. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
13. I feel the activities done both in class and in the language lab have had a positive effect on my language growth since the implementation of the self-assessment exercises. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
14. I will continue to use self-assessment independently for my Greek and other subjects in the future. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

C. The following question is open-ended:

1. Reflect on your overall experiences in doing self-assessment and whether or not it had a positive or null effect on your language abilities. Be as descriptive and detailed as possible. Thank you.

Appendix B

Assignments with open-ended self-assessment questions built into them

1. Language Lab #3

PART A

1. Pair yourself with a partner and get a splinter from me. Attach splinter with the partner you have. Log onto **AUDACITY**.

2. Take out a diagram of your house and take a few moments to reflect about your neighborhood—what you wrote in your essay for today. You can also log onto the on-line dictionary at: <http://www.in.gr/dictionary/lookup.asp> for words you do not know.

3. SITUATION: You want to sell the apartment/house you are living at right now. In order to impress your prospective buyer (a.k.a. your classmate) you begin describing the house amenities and the surrounding neighborhood. As you are doing this, record it on **AUDACITY**.

4. Prospective Buyer: You will listen to the seller, BUT if you do not understand something or have a question about the house—interrupt her/him for clarification. **CONTINUE RECORDING AS THIS IS HAPPENING.**

5. SAVE your recording as a WAV file. Save it as both your names1.

6. Switch roles and do the same as in steps 3, 4, and 5. Save your dialogue as both your names2.

7. After the recordings, listen to your partner’s recording and fill out worksheet **4.11**. At the bottom of this worksheet, write a quick reflection on what your listening comprehension skills—try to think of the time of the first recording and listening of your partner—were you able to understand what he/she was trying to explain?

8. Listen to your recording and fill out worksheet **4.9** and then write a reflection going into more depth on the responses that you gave on this sheet and/or write on aspects of your speaking ability that you noticed/hadn’t noticed before, would like to improve, what you liked or didn’t like about your speaking. Did you convey yourself well? What do you think needs improving in your speaking? How will you go about improving it? Did you think you can sell your house based on your description?

2. Language Lab #4

1. TO HAND IN:

1 Revised, transcribed dialogues from last Wednesday as your quiz #11 for this week.

2 Spring Break Packet with ALL 7 parts included

3 Defense of your quiz #9 grade, self-assessment

2. Log onto: grk104-1 + Get Headphones neptune

3. Go to: <https://polis.arizona.edu>

Answer to both writing prompts and/or react to classmates (**10 minutes**)

4. For those of you have finished or done this already during the week, look at the menu packets handed out yesterday and study/practice the dialogues (with a partner if available). **On page 57 of your books**, there are food terms like, baked, fried, boiled that you might want to review. You may even record and listen to yourselves if time permits.

5. For the last part of class, get a partner and do the following:

Situation:

Customer: You are at a fast food Greek restaurant and you need to order quickly from the menu displayed in bright signs above the fast-food counter (in this case, your menus from the Greek restaurant or the ones in your packet). As you are doing this, record it on **AUDACITY**.

Worker: You will listen to the customer, but you need to ask him/her how they would like their meal, and with what food items, sides, they want it with, if they want desert, drink, etc. You will also be in charge in giving the price of the food purchased in euros.

6. Save your work as **both of your names3 (Natalie and Kiki3)**, as an mp3 file and save it to the class folder and send a copy to your email address.

7. Reverse roles and do the same thing, save it as (Natalie and Kiki4).

HW---4/22

1.

- Listen to your dialogues in both of your roles (as customer and as worker) from home
- Grade yourselves according to the criteria of the rubrics I will have handed out to you (one for customer, one for worker)
- Defend your grade—why did you give yourself that grade—explain in as much detail as possible

2. You now have access to all your work done in the language lab in mp3 format. All the work is in the “Mp3 Versions” file. You may take the time to email your previous week’s work and save your work on a CD as a nice reminder☺

3. Go to the POLIS site and contribute to the NEW discussion board question

4. Write up a written version of a restaurant dialogue—bring it to class

5. Think of a date to go to “MY BIG FAT GREEKS” Btw 4/22-4/23, 4/26-30, during slow hours (2-4:30pm). Best if you go as a group—STRENGTH IN NUMBERS!