RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Influence of Self-Assessment on the English Language Learning Process of Students from a Public University in Colombia

La influencia de la autoevaluación en el aprendizaje del inglés en una universidad pública en Colombia

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Abstract

Self-assessment is considered a reliable and valid means to evaluate the effects of both teaching and learning. The lack of research studies concerning self-assessment in the English language teacher education program targeted in this study evidence that no policy determines how learners can self-assess their learning process. Thereupon, we conducted this qualitative-descriptive case study that relies on the principles of postmodern perspectives and constructivist theories that advocate the construction of learner knowledge. The main objective was to determine how self-assessment influences the language learning process of a group of students from the aforementioned ELT education program. To respond to this inquiry, we collected data through the participants' reflective journals, focus group discussion commentaries, and an interview to analyze their reflections on their English learning process. The results showed a positive response from students towards reflection. According to their comments, self-assessment evaluates more profound aspects of the self, such as autonomy, self-recognition, critical thinking, persistence, and self-efficacy. They also highlighted the role of their first language, reflective journals, and focus group discussions as facilitators to self-assess in-depth and promote collective reflection. Additionally, the study revealed disadvantages such as difficulties in self-recognizing their learning performance and the lack of objectivity and honesty with themselves at the moment of reflecting.

Keywords: formative assessment, English language learning, reflective journals, self-assessment

Resumen

La autoevaluación es considerada un medio confiable y válido para evaluar los efectos tanto de la enseñanza como del aprendizaje. La falta de estudios de investigación sobre autoevaluación en el programa de licenciatura en inglés sobre el cual se llevó a cabo esta investigación muestra que no existe una política que determine cómo los estudiantes

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pueden autoevaluar su proceso de aprendizaje. Por esa razón realizamos este estudio de caso cualitativo-descriptivo que se basa en principios de perspectivas posmodernas y teorías constructivistas que abogan por la construcción del conocimiento de los estudiantes. El objetivo principal fue determinar cómo la autoevaluación influye en el proceso de aprendizaje de un idioma en un grupo de estudiantes del mencionado programa de licenciatura en inglés. Para responder a esta pregunta, recolectamos datos por medio de los diarios de reflexión, comentarios de discusiones de grupo focal y una entrevista a los participantes para analizar sus reflexiones sobre el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés. Los resultados mostraron una respuesta positiva de los estudiantes hacia la reflexión. Según sus comentarios, la autoevaluación examina aspectos más profundos del individuo como la autonomía, el autorreconocimiento, el pensamiento crítico, la perseverancia y la autoeficacia. También destacaron el uso de la lengua nativa, el papel de los diarios de reflexión y las discusiones de los grupos focales como facilitadores para autoevaluarse en profundidad y promover la reflexión colectiva. Adicionalmente, el estudio reveló desventajas como la dificultad de los estudiantes para reconocer su desempeño en el aprendizaje y la falta de objetividad y honestidad con ellos mismos al momento de reflexionar.

Palabras clave: evaluación formativa, aprendizaje de inglés, diarios de reflexión, autoevaluación

Introduction

Self-assessment is a reliable procedure that fosters learners' reflection in order to identify needs and overcome weaknesses to accomplish goals and improve performance (Fitzpatrick, 2006). It is an essential component in the development of teaching and learning processes. Concerning learning a foreign language, Rodríguez-Ochoa (2007) agrees that "self-assessment practices should be a space in which reflection becomes a key aspect to be considered in the hard process of learning English as a foreign language" (p. 231).

There is currently a need for students to construct their own knowledge and increase their thinking skills to succeed academically and in life (El-Koumy, 2010). Moreover, self-assessment helps students take responsibility for learning and promotes self-motivation and autonomy. Some authors (Muñoz et al., 2012; Restrepo and Nelson, 2013; Archila et al., 2018; Herrera and Zambrano, 2019) agree on the fact that, in the Colombian context, more specifically at the university level, research in the field of assessment needs to be explored more in-depth. Although some principles in official documents of the university targeted in this study state that evaluation must be permanent, comprehensive, multifaceted, and, above all aspects, formative, these documents do not provide specific guidelines or procedures or methodologies for teachers or students. When it comes to self-assessment procedures, nothing is suggested in institutional documents.

For that reason, we decided to conduct a study to identify possible influences, benefits, advantages, or disadvantages emerging from the implementation of self-assessment-related strategies on students' learning. Hence, this study intends to answer the following research question: how does self-assessment influence the English learning process of students from an English Language Teacher Education program at a Colombian public university when reflecting through journals and focus group discussions?

To answer this research question, we seek to meet the following specific objectives:

- To draw connections between students' previous experiences and perceptions of self-assessment, as well as their conceptions after self-evaluating through journals and focus group discussions.

- To identify the advantages and disadvantages of self-assessment when reflecting through journals and focus group discussions according to students' perspectives.

- To analyze how self-assessment instruments and procedures (reflective journals and focus group discussions) influence students' reflection.

Self-assessment is broadly recognized as a learning strategy that promotes language learning autonomy and allows learners to constantly examine

their advancement and make decisions upon their learning difficulties. This means that students take some responsibility for their learning process (Harris, 1997; Warchulski, 2015).

According to the results from two research studies conducted in our local context, we wanted to continue filling the research gap in the assessment field. The elements we found provided ideas for developing a strategy that fosters the implementation of self-assessment opportunities in the classroom. Thus, this research intended to explore the impact of self-assessment on the English learning process of undergraduate students.

Literature review

This section presents the literature related to the main constructs of this study. In the first place, approaching self-assessment from distinct perspectives implies a broad concept of this learning practice, followed by the introduction of relevant insights and conceptualizations about formative assessment. In addition, reflective journals and focus group discussions are portrayed as self-assessment instruments.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is defined as a multidimensional activity in which learners observe and evaluate their own learning process (Kramp and Lee Humphreys, 1993). In this sense, Stan and Manea (2015) claim that teacher assessment and student self-assessment are compatible factors that motivate the continuation of the educational process and enhance academic performance. Alongside assessment, self-assessment is one of the essential components in the educational process; it plays a fundamental role in teaching and learning activities.

An important attribute of FA is its democratic component: the possibility of providing all participants of the teaching-learning-assessment process with a voice, especially those who have traditionally been passive agents in assessment-related decisions and procedures. Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) assert that "the scarcity of feedback in most classrooms is due,

in large part, to the fact that few teachers have the luxury of regularly responding to each student's work" (p. 12). Likewise, they also affirm that learners can be valuable feedback sources through self-assessment.

Shohamy (1998) provides a field-related definition of self-assessment: it is the practice in which "language learners judge their language ability" (p. 246). Brookhart and Moss (2009) state that self-assessment occurs when students evaluate their performance and identify their strong and weak areas to progress in their learning.

Panadero and Tapia (2013) argue that self-assessment can be defined from two different theories: in the first place, self-assessment as an instructional process, whereby the teacher asks their students to examine and reflect on what they have done in class; and, secondly, self-assessment as a learning strategy derived from self-regulation theories related to the metacognitive aspects of the person, who controls their learning process using distinct strategies to meet specific objectives. In this regard, Zimmerman (2008) states that the theory of self-regulation learning "is viewed as proactive processes that students use to acquire metacognitive skills, such as setting goals, selecting and deploying strategies, and self-monitoring one's effectiveness " (p. 166). Hence, the implementation of self-assessment in the classroom helps students become a resource for their learning process and fosters the development of metacognition (Black, 2009). When used appropriately, it allows students to provide insights aiming to improve their learning, and this process can be stimulated when they are encouraged to assess their metacognitive skills. Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) also highlight the importance of strategic competence in language use and other activities. This strategic competence consists of "metacognitive strategies which are executive processes that enable language users to engage in goal setting, assessment and planning" (p. 79). Thus, metacognitive skills refer to knowing how to and being able to organize, guide, and control one's thinking, action, and learning; metacognition deals with a specific set of skills, namely task orientation, goal setting, planning, a systematic approach, monitoring oneself during task execution, evaluating outcomes, and reflection

(talenteducation.eu, n.d). It is known that, when students possess these skills, it is easier for them to navigate their learning process and achieve more successful outcomes.

Self-assessment needs to be implemented from the two aforementioned theoretical approaches, as they complement each other; self-assessment as an instructional process helps pupils learn to evaluate themselves based on an established criterion. Thus, self-regulation emerges, improving metacognitive planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes. In connection with this conception about self-assessment, O'Malley and Valdez (1996, as cited in Rodríguez-Ochoa, 2007) assert that this procedure "promotes critical thinking and involves students directly in their process of learning" (p. 234).

Considering these essential notions, it is compelling to think of self-assessment a little beyond the mere assessment of language skills. We advocate for the use of self-assessment for learners to evaluate their abilities to learn beyond evaluating language learning itself.

Integrating the advantages of self-assessment in language evaluation into self-assessing cognitive skills will enable higher learning achievement. By extension, the development of learners is increasingly more prone to success in different spheres of life.

Formative assessment (FA)

Formative assessment refers to the evaluation of an ongoing teaching and learning process to seek improvement (Brown, 2004; Brookhart and Moss, 2009). According to Andrade and Cizek (2010), the main objectives of formative assessment are 1) to pinpoint the student's strengths and weaknesses, 2) to help the teachers in the planning and later instruction, 3) to support the students in leading their learning process and developing self-evaluation abilities, and 4) to promote independence for learning on the student's behalf. Likewise, the authors stress the great potential that FA has at bridging the gaps between classroom practice and large-scale assessment. It represents the best chance for guiding the students into achieving greater results.

Moss and Brookhart (2009) highlight the importance of the partnership between teachers and students to accomplish "powerful learning outcomes" (p. 5), which, as a result, allows students and teachers to increase their engagement and effectiveness. Indeed, being active and intentional are two fundamental traits of FA, whose ultimate goal is to improve students' achievement through a systematic and continuous collection of evidence regarding the learning process. According to Muñoz and Álvarez (2007), in many cultures, the teacher is perceived as the one responsible for assessment, so students are considered passive recipients of knowledge and do not participate in the evaluation process. Luckily, this conception has been changing as learners are starting to be recognized as constructors of their own learning. This suggests that students and teachers should both be seen as active members of the process. Andrade et al. (2019) clarify the characteristics of FA when stating that "the focus of formative assessment is squarely on providing feedback and information for adjusting ongoing teaching and learning" (p. 5).

Several writers stress the need to integrate teachers' and students' views in formative assessment practices to achieve this. Considering these perspectives is important to know the learners' strengths and weaknesses, understand their learning and conceptual organization, heighten the students' engagement, and help them grow into self-aware learners (Andrade and Cizek, 2010; Moss and Brookhart, 2009). Other authors underline the role of formative assessment in aiding students to become more responsible for and self-regulate their learning in order to gain independence as learners by getting involved in assessment (Andrade et al., 2019; Black, 2009).

Methodological design

Due to the characteristics of the intervention, this study follows the features of a case study. In this regard, Goundar (2012) states that a case study is a useful approach that implies a detailed examination of real-life experiences from, among others, a particular group of people to understand a complex situation or problem better. Similarly, Creswell

and Poth (2016) define case studies research as a qualitative approach "in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case themes" (p. 73). Following Yin (2009), through case studies, the researcher can describe or explore daily events or phenomena in our context. Thus, this study responds to an educational inquiry concerning our local ELT education program.

Participants

This study's sample consisted of 19 undergraduate students from the pre-intermediate English course of an ELT education program at a Colombian public university. Nine were females, and ten were males ranging between 16-21 years old. Students were informed of all the research study details, and they subsequently signed a consent form to participate.

Pedagogical and research instruments

We used reflective journals, focus group discussions, and an interview to follow students' process for self-assessment on their learning process.

Reflective journals and focus group discussions as self-assessment instruments

Firstly, journals are mainly free analytical writing tasks that describe events drawing from experiences and insights about learning processes. In this sense, reflective journals make writers think deeply about their level of performance. Reflective journals (RJs) (Appendix A and B, sample two of the four RJs) are powerful instruments through which learners can record any observations, thoughts, feelings, and understandings about their learning process. Bassot (2016) states that a reflective journal enables one to gain a deeper understanding of oneself and one's practice through writing. Furthermore, RJs have been considered a useful method that provides an opportunity for researchers to hear students' voices through the chance given to them to express the thoughts and changes they experience as a part of their learning experience (Dunlap, 2006). In this regard, self-reflecting objectively allows the learners to achieve better outcomes and propose solutions or alternatives to certain difficulties throughout the process.

A total of four reflective journals (two sent via email and two implemented on-site) were applied in different moments every two weeks for approximately three months during the data collection period, in order to have the participants self-analyze their competence in the foreign language, so that they could continuously self-evaluate their actual performance. Additionally, the journals were elaborated in their native language (Spanish) to facilitate participants' reflections, and five to six guiding questions were provided.

Secondly, a focus group discussion (FGD) (Appendix C) or simply focus group is a qualitative research method and data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic or issue in depth with the guidance of a moderator. Morgan (1996) defines focus groups as a "research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (p. 130). Therefore, this method serves to analyze the participants' attitudes and perceptions, knowledge, experiences, and practices shared in the course of interaction with different people and their differences in terms of experiences, opinions, and worldviews during such 'open' discussion rounds. According to O'Nyumba et al. (2018), the focus group discussion technique "aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population" (p. 20). Thus, this method assumes that group processes aid in identifying and clarifying shared knowledge among groups and communities, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain individually.

For this study, a focus group discussion was planned after the students responded to the first two reflective journals. Thus, this instrument sought an in-depth exploration of the participants' reflections by asking complementary questions to clarify or provide details of their English learning process and their experience with self-evaluation practices.

Finally, interviews are among the most commonly used methods to gather qualitative data. Anthropologists and sociologists have frequently utilized qualitative research interviews with different purposes and principles. In implementing this procedure, the researcher formulates and asks questions seeking to understand the meaning of key issues of the subject's lived world (Kvale, 2008). Interviews can be structured or semi-structured. Structured interviews consist of working through a pre-established number of questions. Semi-structured interview follow more flexible formatting and use open-ended questions as a method of inquiry. The flexibility of this procedure enables the emergence of unpredicted topics and themes (Burns, 1999). A semi-structured interview was implemented in this study to get in-depth and detailed information about students' insights and thoughts about their self-assessment and the way in which reflective journals and focus group discussions influenced this process. This instrument was designed to identify and describe the participants' perceptions and experiences after they underwent the process of self-assessment.

Research question

How does self-assessment influence the English learning process of students from an English language teacher education program at a Colombian public university when reflecting through journals and focus group discussions?

Data analysis and findings

The analysis of the data gathered from the reflective journals, focus group discussion, and interview was based on the fusion of the stages proposed by Burns (1999) and Creswell (2009) in their data analysis frameworks. The first stage consisted of organizing and preparing the data for analysis. We collected the information from the RJs and transcribed recordings of the FGD and the interview.

The second stage involved reading through the responses to have a general sense of the data

and reflect on its overall meaning. Many ideas and commonalities were identified, so, based on each of the students' answers, we wrote some comments highlighting patterns related to their insights into their English learning process, self-assessment practices, and instruments implemented in the study.

The third stage suggested stating key ideas and themes from the collected information. For this coding process, the data from all the instruments were organized into text segments labeled with terms taken from the participants' actual speech. Therefore, all the data was compiled in a single document to analyze every response from all the participants and group correlated thoughts to establish themes and categories that could emerge from them according to the research objectives.

The fourth stage consisted of contrasting the distinct text segments to observe the interrelation and repetition of patterns, themes, or data sequences across the sources to minimize the number of categories. Data consolidation demanded great effort and coordination to present the information in a condensed fashion. Nevertheless, the main purpose of this stage was "to describe and display the data rather than to interpret or explain it" (Burns, 1999, p. 158).

The fifth stage implied interpreting or giving meaning to the information based on our understanding, knowledge, experiences, and conceptualizations. On this matter, the interpretation sought to explore the effect of self-assessment on the participants' learning.

The final stage involved determining the representation of the descriptions and themes. To this effect, the narrative approach is believed to be the most commonly used to convey the findings of the analysis. Among the possibilities that this approach offers are discussions that mention a chronology of events, detailed discussions of several themes, or interconnecting themes (Creswell, 2009, p. 189). In this regard, the way the findings are shown, analyzed, and discussed follows the narrative approach with the purpose of presenting the information in an organized manner.

In this study, we analyzed responses about the influence of self-assessment on students' EFL learning process. We explored students' previous experiences and perceptions of self-assessment and those after the research was carried out. We then discussed the advantages and disadvantages students encountered throughout the implementation of this process. Additionally, we examined how reflective journals and focus group discussions influenced the students' self-evaluation of their learning performance.

Table 1 illustrates the categories that emerged from the data collected, according to each objective of this study.

Perceptions of self-assessment

Self-assessment as a requirement to give a score: a teacher-centered approach

When analyzing students' previous experiences and perceptions concerning self-assessment, which were expressed in the first reflective journal and the focus group discussion, we identified that students' autonomous assessment practices are not promoted in the classroom, as teachers are seen as responsible for most of the evaluation process. In some cases, teachers provided students with self-assessment rubrics, but with the sole purpose of adding a score.

One of the reasons why students perceived self-assessment as a requirement to give a score might be some language teachers' lack of assessment preparation. Unfortunately, in our educational context, traditional assessment practices and teacher-centered approaches still prevail, as implied in the following comments:

> *Interview (I) -Student 3 (S3)*: "I remember studying a subject in which the teacher had never graded any assignment during the course, and unexpectedly he asked us to tell him a self-assessment score. I graded 4.8, and that was my final mark of that cohort."

According to the participants' comments, we can notice that some teachers continue implementing the traditional teacher-centered approach in the

Table 1. Objectives and categories

Research question	Specific objectives	Analysis categories
How does self-assessment influence the English learning process of students from an English language teacher education program at a Colombian public university when reflecting through journals and focus group discussions?	1. To draw connections between students' previous experiences and perceptions of self-assessment, as well as their conceptions after self-evaluating through journals and focus group discussions	Self-assessment as a requirement to give a score: a teacher-centered approach
		Self-assessment beyond a score: a strategy to evaluate more profound aspects of the self
	2. To identify the advantages and disadvantages of self-assessment when reflecting through journals and focus group discussions according to students' perspectives	Developing autonomous language learning skills
		Fostering individual qualities: self-recognition, critical thinking, and persistence
		Enhancing self-efficacy at work
		Self-recognition of learning performance
		Lacking objectivity and honesty with oneself
	3. To analyze how self-assessment instruments and procedures (reflective journals and focus group discussions) support students' reflection	Reflective journals guiding self-assessment through clear and pertinent questions
		Using Spanish as a facilitator to self-assess in depth
		Opening spaces to self-assess in educational settings
		Promoting collective reflection through focus group discussions

Source: Authors

classroom, which does not allow students to express themselves, ask questions, and direct their learning. In this approach, the instructor's role is to be the primary information provider and evaluator. As for assessment, it is in many cases only carried out from a summative perspective and not a formative one, and it rarely addresses qualitative issues of the learner's progress or self-assessment practices.

Based on the collected data, students perceived self-assessment as a requirement, only as a significant component that grades students' work by following certain criteria. Andrade and Du (2007) found multiple benefits in using criteria-referenced self-assessment, such as improving the quality of students' learning and their work, course grades, and motivation. However, the researchers suggested that learners must know their teacher's expectations to improve and evaluate the quality of their work effectively.

Self-assessment beyond a score: a strategy to evaluate more profound aspects of the self

In the interview at the end of the process, we could infer from the students' reflections that they realized that self-assessment is not merely related to scores and criteria after participating in this research study. Through self-assessment, they could evaluate the linguistic aspects of learning a language and more profound aspects of the self, such as decision-making, goal setting, and self-awareness. These conceptions refer to self-assessment as a learning strategy derived from self-regulation theories, which are related to the metacognitive aspects of the person who controls learning, using distinct strategies to meet specific objectives (Panadero and Tapia, 2013). This approach indicates that learners intentionally self-reflect on their learning advancement to recognize academic attitudes and behaviors that restrain or enhance improvement. Additionally, self-evaluation from the self-regulation learning perspective involves a permanent examination of performance levels to find adequate alternatives seeking progress and achieving goals. Some of the aspects concerning what self-assessment involves are expressed in the following participants' ideas taken from the interview:

Interview (I) – Student 5 (S5): "In my view, self-evaluation is to wonder about my weaknesses, about what I need to reinforce, my strengths, and the methods I utilize to improve my deficiencies."
Interview (I) – Student 7 (S7): "After participating in this research project, I understand self-assessment as a reflective process in which I can identify my weak areas to achieve the goals I have established."

We can evidence the relevant role that self-assessment plays in the metacognitive aspects of the students' learning process. They recalled some experiences in previous courses assessing their learning, and they were aware of the misconception of thinking of it only as a score rather than a reflection. By processing this information, learners could better understand the meaning and purpose of reflection in self-assessment.

According to the students ' perspectives, the following section presents the advantages and disadvantages of self-assessment when reflecting through journals and focus group discussions.

Advantages of self-assessment

Developing autonomous learning skills

The participants claimed that self-assessment could benefit the learning process. It suggests an intentional examination in which they recognize their learning behaviors, deficiencies, and actions to determine effective strategies to direct their cognition and goals. The following comment supports this claim:

Reflective Journal 4 (RJ4) – Student 5 (S5): "I believe that self-assessment has been very significant, autonomously. I have to admit that at the beginning learning English was a complex task, but, thanks to self-evaluation procedures, I have overcome some of my weaknesses."

These comments reveal how self-assessment enables learners to consciously examine their learning process by identifying both strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it is not only a matter of recognizing their abilities and lacks but also

empowering them to autonomously reflect, to take action for improvement, and to look for better strategies to address their needs.

Along with the influences of self-assessment on their language learning skills, we can highlight the enhancement of responsibility and commitment to their learning, become reflective learners, and increase their motivation to keep a reflecting attitude, even after participating in this research project. Likewise, participating in this research study made the students develop a sense of reflection for their future learning process. The students also acknowledged that performing self-assessment in their English learning process allowed them to develop a sense of autonomy and self-management to control their progress and achieve specific learning goals in the target language, as supported by the following comment:

> *Interview (I) – Student 2 (S2):* "I consciously know the role of self-assessment in my process. Now, I am more thoughtful when I come to class; I focus on how I can solve problems and which strategies I should implement on my own (autonomously) to support what I learned in class."

In this regard, Benson and Voller (2014) state that, in learning a language, autonomy represents a quality that is inseparable from effective learning. Thus, permanent engagement in self-assessment practices promotes the development of autonomous learning skills that enable learners to make choices.

Fostering individual qualities: self-recognition, critical thinking, and persistence

The participants manifested that self-assessment fosters self-development abilities to acknowledge their attitudes, actions, and performance towards achieving goals. Similarly, the students argued that they strengthened critical skills to find solutions and overcome difficulties in their learning, as supported by the following comments:

> *Interview (I) – Student 5 (S5):* "Even when you perform well in learning, you never know

everything, so you need to keep learning, self-evaluating and self-constructing to improve as a human."

This comment refers to the fact that self-evaluation is a strategy that makes individuals self-recognize their deficiencies and propose alternatives for improvement. Similarly, participants deemed it necessary to know one's actual performance to determine its real purpose. This assertion relates to one of the main principles of self-assessment practices that understand the aim of what will be done.

> *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) - Student 7 (S7):* "One becomes more critic (…) you learn to know yourself and don't lie upon your performance because it would be unreasonable to do a self-evaluation process in which you are not honest with yourself, one learns to face problems, overcome them, and find solutions."

The participants noted that self-assessment fosters the development of critical thinking skills to overcome difficult situations in life. In this regard, Muñoz and Álvarez (2007) point out that "critical thinking is the exercise of cognitive and metacognitive skills that can be used to accomplish a task; both involve active monitoring and self-regulation" (p. 35). Hence, this ability allows for proper decision-making when facing challenges.

Enhancing self-efficacy for future professional practice

The participants stated that knowing about self-assessment strategies allows them to guide their future students into an autonomous self-monitoring and self-improvement process. The following comment supports this claim:

> *Interview (I) - Student 6 (S6):* "In the future, when I become a teacher, I can guide my students to self-evaluate their learning to improve their abilities without someone else asking them to do so."

Thus, when teachers can implement self-assessment practices with their students, they may

strengthen students' autonomous learning and their teaching practice. In this regard, Baleghizadeh and Masoun (2013) state that implementing self-assessment regularly on a formative basis "provides the opportunity for discussion of the performance itself, clarification of the behaviors associated with successful performance, and development of individual work" (p. 53).

Disadvantages of self-assessment

Self-recognition of learning performance

In the self-evaluation procedure conducted through reflective journals and a focus group discussion, the participants expressed that their inability to recognize their actual learning performance reduces their possibilities of identifying what areas of improvement they need to overcome. This hindered their ability to judge their level of proficiency and competence. Similarly, participants also mentioned that some learners could be more likely to feel frustration and demotivation when outcomes are not as expected:

> *Interview (I) – Student 8 (S8)*: "If you are not aware of what you are doing, you can self-assess inappropriately; you may think you are performing well; however, it may not be true. If self-assessment procedures are not well oriented, you can overrate or underrate your work. Thus, self-evaluation must be guided permanently."

Undoubtedly, the implementation of self-assessment implies training and a positive classroom atmosphere. Thus, teachers must work towards that purpose by training themselves and their students. Otherwise, students can feel uncertainty or a lack of control over this assessment procedure, which is a risk many teachers do not want to take.

Lacking objectivity and honesty with oneself

Some participants expressed difficulties when going through the reflection process. These issues are directly related to their inability to recognize their learning performance, as they revealed that they found some inconveniences when appreciating their proficiency and being honest with themselves. Sometimes they just rely on their classmates' or teachers' judgment:

> *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) – Student 7 (S7)*: "At the beginning, analyzing my learning process was difficult because you tend to lie to yourself. Then, suppose you analyze your learning process, or you are based on what the teacher or a classmate says about your learning, or even the obtained grades, in reality. In that case, it is not my level of proficiency, (…) so it was not an easy task to identify what I am currently doing to improve or what I am doing wrong."

The lack of guidance through self-assessment may make students feel insecure and unaware of themselves. Self-assessment accuracy may improve when the statements and questions are clear and tied to specific concepts or behaviors that students can reflect on or even mentally simulate, such as defining a term, explaining a concept, or recalling specific experiences. Moreover, using self-assessment instruments might facilitate students' reflection, which results in more valuable feedback on their EFL learning process.

Factors that contributed to self-assessment

Guiding reflection through journals and questions

According to Bassot (2016), reflective journals enable learners to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their practice through writing. Self-reflecting objectively allows them to achieve better outcomes and propose solutions or alternatives to certain difficulties throughout the ongoing process. In this context, when designing the journals, we, as researchers, tried to be clear and concise with each journal's guiding questions. Thus, the students could make their reflections in the best way possible, regardless of their level of reflection. That is why most of the participants agreed on the relevance of the structure and the guiding questions to facilitate and orient their reflections, as implied in the following comments:

Interview (I) – Student 4 (S4): "In all the journals, the oriented questions met the function of guiding since it was not only a given topic to reflect on, but it helped us know how and where to start; those oriented questions provided us with ideas about what to write."

Interview (I) – Student 10 (S10): "I think it has been a great instrument because the given questions allowed us to express ourselves and guided us to respond properly and freely. I would like those journals to be implemented in each academic semester to reflect indeed about our learning."

We can say that the guidance given through the questions eased the process of reflection. That is to say, the guiding questions from the instrument not only encouraged and helped them internalize but also promoted a thorough reflection on their learning since it covered the whole process from the very beginning.

Using the mother tongue as a facilitator for self-assessment

To make students comfortable during the reflection process, we allowed them to express themselves in their mother tongue. Therefore, the students claimed that using their first language (Spanish) allowed them to freely and comfortably express their thoughts.

Interview (I) – Student (S7): "what caught my attention the most was that the journals were addressed in Spanish because there was no limit, I could express everything with no problem."

Interview (I) – Student 3 (S3): "I thought it was interesting that the journals were addressed in Spanish because it was an appropriate way that enabled us to express ourselves better."

These students' perceptions confirmed that using their mother tongue to reflect on their learning experiences enabled them to provide detailed information and promote deeper reflection. Besides, since the level of English proficiency varies from student to student, not all of them would find it easy to write in a foreign language, somehow hindering the expression of their beliefs and opinions.

Finding a suitable setting for self-assessment

The journals' implementation was divided into two big moments: the journals sent via email and responded when participants had the time to do so, and the journals completed in the classroom in the presence of the researchers. We could analyze and identify a significant difference between these two ways of implementation. Even if students expressed that all the reflective journals implemented were adequate to promote their participation, they still suggested that on-site journal applications were more effective than email. All the participants were given the time and space (classroom) to make their reflections. In this sense, the students acknowledged that their commitment and the quality of their reflections probably varied without the researchers' supervision, given that their participation depended on their time availability and engagement with this activity.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) – Student 2 (S2): "I think it is better to do it on-site. When you are at home, it depends on what you are doing at the moment; sometimes you don't focus on the activity, and you lack the context, the suitable environment to do the reflection (…) I think more journals should be implemented to be a longer process."

Student dependence on teachers' instructions and monitoring influence their learning behavior and performance, as they feel the need to comply with what is required by the teacher. When collecting the participants' responses, we could evidence that sending the reflective journals via email had disadvantages such as late submissions, low quality of reflection, and briefness. On the contrary, from the journals implemented in the educational setting, we could identify that the students provided us with more in-depth information and reflection for analysis.

Promoting collective reflection through focus group discussions

We could identify how students supported their ideas by interacting and sharing self-reflection with others through the focus group discussion

during the study. In the discussion sessions, the participants had the opportunity to understand that their English performance was associated with their experiences since they started learning the foreign language. Likewise, the students could also identify their weaknesses and strengths with the four key language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). In this regard, the students also self-analyzed their attitude and behavior after obtaining a low score or struggling to overcome language skills difficulties. The English skill with which the students agreed to have more problems was writing. Therefore, they realized that their classmates faced similar difficulties and concerns. The following are some of the students' comments concerning the application of the focus group discussion:

> *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) – Student 2 (S2)*: "It's great to share reflections collectively in the way we did it because I think we sometimes have the knowledge and don't express it, but listening to others' points of view facilitates the process of reflecting."

In this connection, throughout the reflective journals and the focus group discussion, the students realized that their actual performance in the target language was not a mere coincidence but the result of their actions, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, they were responsible for their learning progress. They stated that reflective journals and focus group discussions are effective and useful activities to self-evaluate their performance, more so when the statements or questions are clear and goal-oriented.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

To answer the research questions in this study, the findings suggest that self-assessment positively impacts students' learning process, even if it is steered towards the recognition and reflection on the development of metacognition. However, reflection about metacognitive aspects is difficult, as students might not objectively recognize all aspects of their learning. Besides, we can say that students need to be constantly engaged in this process to achieve

self-assessment practices adequately. According to Muñoz and Álvarez (2007), "when students recognize that they are able to accurately assess themselves, they will be more confident and motivated to participate in self-assessment activities" (p. 37).

Teaching students to self-assess requires consistent and systematic procedures. Training activities on self-assessment need to be continuously performed, with constant guidance for learners and the materials used to obtain reliable results. At the same time, learners need to understand self-assessment in order to undertake this procedure. Otherwise, they will not consider it meaningful or will do it wrong.

It is a common misconception that students are not teachers, and hence they cannot assess themselves (Ming, 2016). Yet, we believe that students can be empowered to take ownership of their learning, given their teachers' appropriate structure and guidance. Additionally, when teachers allow students to self-monitor, they develop a better understanding and management of cognitive processes as well.

On the other hand, self-assessment is a fundamental element to be considered in the lesson planning stage. In this sense, this type of assessment should be formulated from the beginning of the learning process, establishing clear guidelines and making adequate use of techniques and activities (Moqbel, 2018). Thus, students can understand that self-assessment is not an extra activity but a fundamental part of their educational process.

Considering this, the ELT Education program targeted in this study should promote self-assessment in all the courses from the first to the last semester. This, considering that the pre-intermediate English course did not include self-assessment as a procedure to be carried out in class. In this regard, it seems that this crucial assessment element is not being implemented as it should.

Finally, we suggest further research to analyze the characteristics and impact of self-assessment practices on language learners' results and advancement. Even when students declared that

they found various benefits and obtained better outcomes in their language learning throughout this research, a longer research period might offer additional supporting data on their improvement.

Overall, considering the undeniable advantages of self-assessment towards improving the learning process, this study aims to translate those advantages into improving metacognitive skills. This, in turn, will contribute to more satisfactory results in students' learning and self-reflection.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Reflective Journal 1

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Preguntas orientadoras:

1. ¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia aprendiendo inglés antes de ingresar al programa de inglés? (satisfactoria, difícil u otra). Por favor argumente su respuesta.

2. ¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia aprendiendo inglés después de ingresar al programa de inglés? (satisfactoria, difícil u otra). Por favor argumente su respuesta.

3. Desde que ha tenido contacto con el aprendizaje del idioma ¿Cuáles experiencias han tenido mayor impacto en su proceso de aprendizaje del inglés? ¿cómo ha sido su participación durante estas? (por experiencias nos referimos a alguna actividad significativa que haya tenido durante su proceso: una actividad con algún profesor, una estrategia de aprendizaje en específico, la lectura de algún libro o cualquier otra que haya sido relevante para su proceso de aprendizaje del inglés).

4. ¿Cómo cree que estas experiencias han influido en lo que ha aprendido durante este curso (Pre-Intermediate English)?

5. ¿Qué oportunidades y/o dificultades ha identificado en su proceso de aprendizaje del inglés hasta el momento?

Appendix B. Reflective Journal 4

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Preguntas orientadoras.

1. ¿Cuál(es) habilidad(es) lingüística(s) (lectura, escritura, escucha, habla) considera que ha fortalecido mejor en su aprendizaje del inglés desde que ingresó al Programa de Licenciatura en inglés? ¿Por qué?

2. ¿Cuáles cree que son los factores por los cuales se le ha facilitado el desarrollo de esa(s) habilidad(es)?

3. ¿Cuál habilidad lingüística (lectura, escritura, escucha, habla) cree que debería fortalecer más? ¿Por qué?

4. ¿Cuáles cree que son los factores por los cuales se le dificulta?

5. ¿Qué acciones ha tomado para superar estas dificultades?

6. ¿Cree que los profesores han aportado al desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas durante su proceso? ¿De qué manera?

Appendix C. Focus Group Discussion

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

¿Cómo fue tu experiencia aprendiendo inglés antes de ingresar a la universidad?

¿Cómo ha sido tu experiencia aprendiendo inglés después de ingresar al programa de inglés?

¿Qué oportunidades y/o dificultades has identificado en su proceso de aprendizaje del inglés hasta el momento?

¿Cuál/es consideras que es/son tus fortalezas y/o debilidades en cuanto a las habilidades lingüísticas del inglés?

¿Qué acciones tomas para mejorar las debilidades encontradas en el aprendizaje del inglés?

¿Qué dificultades/debilidades encontraste estás últimas semanas en el aprendizaje del idioma inglés?

¿De qué manera tus profesores han aportado al desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas durante tu proceso?

¿Alguna vez has escuchado acerca de la autoevaluación?

¿En qué momento o cómo reflexionas sobre tu aprendizaje?