A Study of the Effects of Student Self-assessment on the EFL Writing of Chinese College Students

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To get more insight into using self-assessment in writing instruction, the present study intends to explore the effects of student self-assessment on students’ EFL writing by adopting writing assignments, analytic scoring rubric, questionnaires and interviews. It is found that students are able to make judgments about the overall quality of their writing in a manner consistent with those made by the teacher and students made significant improvements in content, organization, and mechanics of their writing after the practice of self-assessment while qualities concerning vocabulary and language use have been improved but not to a significant level. Moreover, the study demonstrates that the practice of self-assessment has exerted positive influence on students’ perceptions of their writing skills in terms of organization, language use and mechanics while it does not result in any change of students’ perceptions of their writing skills in content and vocabulary. These implications are conductive to working out a set of new models of the teaching of writing and helping further intensify the innovations of Chinese foreign language teaching.

Keywords: student self-assessment, teacher assessment, analytic scoring, EFL writing

Introduction

Self-assessment has gained much more attention in recent years owing to the growing emphasis on learner independence and learner autonomy. One of the heated controversies in this field is whether student self-assessment works. It is not easy to answer this question. With regard to the self-assessment of writing, Schendel and O’Neill (1999) consider it as a means by which teachers help students to become more metacognitive about their writing and writing process and an attempt by which the negative impacts of grading or test writing can be avoided.

For most of the cases, students complete a writing assignment without later valuing it. They leave the total work of assessment to teachers, believing that it is the teacher’s job to mark essays. Even if they get the feedback from the teacher, they glance at it quickly, paying attention to the grade they got, never taking into account of the reasons why they deserve such a grade. If it goes on like this, students may make a slow and insignificant progress in their writing. However, self-assessment may serve as an aid in dealing with the dilemma students face in that it familiarizes students with the features of a good piece of writing product and makes students reconsider their own work and be self-conscious about the parts that need improvements.

Self-assessment ensures that students are familiar with the basic requirements of writing. The quality of students’ writing may be improved when students understand the details of the criteria against which their work

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will be judged. If students apply these criteria to assess their work, the effects will be stronger. Ross et al. (1998) found that students liked self-evaluation because it increased clarity about expectations and gave students sufficient feedback which they may use to improve the quality of their work. Students reported that with the help of self-assessment, they focused on what they needed to improve instead of the final grade they got because they had already been clear about the criteria for assessing a piece of writing. In the study carried out by the same researchers (Ross et al., 1999), they found that self-evaluation had a much larger impact on the performance of students who wrote poorly at the beginning of the study. The reason may be that self-evaluation training give poorer writers explicit feedback on what they need to improve and on what is more meaningful to them than the feedback they usually receive from the teacher. Students pay more attention to self-evaluation because they understand the criteria, they feel ownership of the data, and they feel empowered because the teacher trusts them to rate themselves fairly.

Self-assessment makes students self-aware of their own work, motivating further revision. Since students get familiar with the criteria in assessing writing, they may apply these criteria to revise their work, making it better by means of addition, deletion, substitution and rearrangement. According to Miller (1982), “taking a stand about the relation of a new event to one’s prior authentic values completes that event by associating it with our past experiences” (p. 182). Ferris (2007) pointed that self-evaluation was not just cop-outs for lazy or exhausted teachers since the mere act of rereading and rewriting one’s own essay usually resulted in at least some improvements. Research studies (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) yielded the findings that even students who simply rewrote or self-edited with no input from anyone improved their end products at least somewhat. Weaker students will benefit more because any ambiguity about the criteria of writing can be avoided in the self-assessment process. Moreover, the self-evaluation training provides poor writers with explicit feedback on what they need to improve, which is more meaningful to them than the feedback they usually received from the teacher, since students may make changes according to the criteria (Cohen & Cavaleanti, 1990). With this help of feedback, students add, delete, substitute and rearrange their work. Miller (1982) finally concluded that “self-evaluation experiencing—the quality of one’s writing in relation to subjective standards—is crucial to the development of an individual’s perception of writing as an important and natural way to investigate problems and represent ideas” (p. 182).

Since the work of Oskarsson (1980), the notion of self-assessment has already undergone close investigation. However, studies investigating whether self-assessment instruments are valid and reliable have yielded mixed results. Moreover, empirical studies of the beneficial effects of self-assessment remain rare in China. This study will employ quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the possible effects of student self-assessment on students’ EFL writing. Findings of the study may offer suggestions for the teaching of writing, provide useful information for language teachers and learners and give an indication as to where there is a need for further research study.

**Methodology**

**Research Questions**

To get more insight into using self-assessment in the writing instruction, the present study specifically intends to answer the following questions:

1. To what degree does student self-assessment agree with teacher assessment on students’ EFL writing?
2. What are the possible effects of self-assessment on students’ EFL writing?
A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

(3) What are the possible effects of self-assessment on students’ perceptions of their writing skills?

Subjects

The subjects of the present study are full-time second-year undergraduate non-English majors in the Department of Public Relations of a higher vocational college in Shandong Province. A total number of 36 students were involved in this study from beginning to end.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study include writing assignments, analytic scoring rubric, questionnaires and interviews.

Writing Assignment. The subjects have learned English for about one and a half year in the college. Considering students’ perceived ability, familiarity with the topic and interest, the author chose a topic on “Environmental Protection”. The subjects are required to write an argumentative essay entitled “Environmental Protection” at least 150 words within 30 minutes. This piece of writing assignment (Draft 1) is completed in class in the first week of this study.

Analytic Scoring Rubric. The marking criteria used in the study is the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zingraf, Worthuth, Hartfield, & Hughey, 1981) (see Table A1). In this analytic scoring rubric, there are five features to be scored and each has a descending four-level scoring scale with its own descriptions. The five features are content (30%), organization (20%), vocabulary (20%), language use (25%), and mechanics (5%).

Questionnaires. The questionnaire used in this study is the one designed by Hedgcock who used it as an achievement measure for his students in the writing course (see Appendix B). Twenty-four statements are involved in the questionnaire regarding students’ perceptions of their writing skills. The statements could be divided into seven categories, namely, content (Items 3, 4, 13, 17, 21), organization (Items 5-8 and 14-16), vocabulary (Item 19), language use (Item 18), mechanics (Items 9, 20, and 22), overall writing confidence (Items 1 and 2), and attitudes towards essay revising (Items 10-12 and 23). The rating scale is based on a six-point Likert scale so that each student will respond as: 1-strongly agree; 2-agree; 3-somewhat agree; 4-somewhat disagree; 5-disagree, and 6-strongly disagree.

The same questionnaire was administered to subjects twice with one at the beginning of the study (prior to the practice of self-assessment), and the other one at the end of the study (after the practice of self-assessment), which mainly aims to investigate how much improvement students have made during the practice of self-assessment.

Interviews. In the study, a semi-structured interview was employed. Four students were randomly chosen to take part in the interview. The interviewer was the author herself. The interview was carried out in Chinese. To avoid the influence on one another, the interview was conducted individually in a classroom and audiotaped with the students’ permission. With the help of interview guidance, the author invited students to express their feelings of doing self-assessment, what they have gained in the process, and how they revised their drafts. Some elaboration in the questions and answers is also allowed.

Research Procedures

Subjects met for 50 minutes once a week after class from Nov. 3rd to Dec. 28th, 2008. During these eight weeks of research time, subjects conducted the questionnaires and interviews, completed their writing assignments, obtained self-assessment training, assessed their own writing, and revised their drafts.
In the first week, students were asked to write an essay about 150 words in the given topic “Environmental Protection” within 30 minutes. After handing in the essay (Draft 1), they were asked to complete the questionnaire to demonstrate their perceptions of their writing skills. Meanwhile, the author started her work of assessing students’ essays.

In the second week, students got back their drafts and the analytic scoring rubric—ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981). With the help of the Profile, students were asked to read their own drafts carefully, assign scores on each feature of the rubric and add these individual analytic scores together to yield a total score. There is no detailed guidance to students on how to do the assessment. From the third week to the sixth week, self-assessment training was conducted on the subjects by the author. In the training session, the author first introduced the meaning of self-assessment to help students form a general idea of self-assessment. Meanwhile, some kinds of self-assessment activities were introduced in order to arouse students’ interest. The author then expounded on the adopted analytic scoring rubric so as to make students understand them fully and use them effectively. After the author has explained the rubric, the students were then asked to practice self-assessment themselves. During the practice, each of the students was given one copy of the sample composition which was chosen from their homework. They were given about ten minutes to read this sample composition. After finishing reading by themselves, students assigned scores on the five features, namely, content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics of the composition according to the guidance of the rubric. As all students finished their assessment, the author demonstrated her assessment and offered corresponding explanations. The students compared their assessment with that of the teacher and then discussed the divergence in their assessment with the teacher. Adjustments were subsequently made and final agreement was reached. The whole process of training is illustrated in Figure 1.

In the seventh week, the original Draft 1 was returned to subjects together with the analytic scoring rubric. Students were asked to reread and revise their drafts according to the analytic scoring rubric. A revised draft (Draft 2) was thus yielded. Meanwhile, a teacher assessment of Draft 2 was finished in this week as well.

In the final week, students got back their revised drafts (Draft 2) and started the work of assessment following the same procedure done in the second week. Finally, students were asked to complete the same questionnaire which they have completed in the beginning of this study. The interviews on students were carried out in this week. An explicit presentation of the research procedure is illustrated in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The teacher introduces the meaning and types of self-assessment and explains the scoring rubric to students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students practice assessing a sample composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students compare their assessment with that of the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and the teacher discuss disagreement in their assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustments are made and final agreement is reached</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. The self-assessment training process.*
Table 1

Research Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Students’ Tasks</th>
<th>Teacher’s Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hand in Draft 1</td>
<td>Do the work of teacher assessment of Draft 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complete the questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Get back Draft 1 and analytic scoring rubric</td>
<td>Self-assess Draft 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>Get a SA training</td>
<td>Do the practice of SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Revise Draft 1 and hand in Draft 2</td>
<td>Do the work of teacher assessment of Draft 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Get back Draft 2</td>
<td>Self-assess Draft 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complete the questionnaire</td>
<td>Take part in interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to investigate whether or not self-assessment could benefit students’ writing, three data sources were used: essays of subjects before and after self-assessment training, questionnaires and interviews. All the obtained quantitative data were analyzed with the help of SPSS 12.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Science). The data from student interview were transcribed, translated from Chinese to English and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

The Degree of Agreement Between Self-Assessment and Teacher Assessment

Results. The marks obtained from student self-assessment are compared with those of teacher assessment. The comparisons are made twice, one prior to the practice of self-assessment and the other after it. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and the results of the independent samples t-tests.

Table 2

Results of Independent Samples t-tests for Self-Assessment and Teacher Assessment on Draft 1 (pre-SA) and Draft 2 (post-SA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Draft 1 (pre-SA)</th>
<th>Draft 2 (post-SA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>19.64</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>13.78</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>13.06</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>15.08</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61.83</td>
<td>11.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

As can be seen from Table 2, there is no significant difference between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on the total scores of both Draft 1 and Draft 2. However, significant differences between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on vocabulary, language use, and mechanics exist in the
assessment of Draft 1 and Draft 2. The mean scores for student self-assessment on vocabulary and language use are higher than those of teacher assessment. While the mean scores for student self-assessment on mechanics are lower than those of teacher assessment. Meanwhile, the difference between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on content and organization is found not to be significant.

Discussion

Agreement on the Total Scores. Comparisons between student self-assessment and teacher assessment through $t$-tests show that there is a good agreement between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on the total marks of both Draft 1 and Draft 2. This agreement indicates that students involved in this study are able to make judgments about their general performance in a manner consistent with those made by the teacher. In other words, students’ marking of their general performance is roughly comparable to that of the teacher. Students are proved to be reliable assessors, confirming the findings made by Bachman and Palmer (1989), Williams (1992), Stefani (1994), Oldfield and Macalpine (1995), and Sullivan and Hall (1997). Even though there is no significant difference between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on the total scores, this agreement is resulted from the mutual making-up of the five components of the total. It is found that students overrate themselves on vocabulary and language use compared to the teacher and underrate themselves on mechanics. When the overrating is integrated with the underrating, an agreement on the total scores has thus reached. When the total scores are broken down to its five components, the agreement between student self-assessment and teacher assessment is found in their marks for content and organization. Students can generally distinguish an essay of good content from one of poor content and one of logical structure from one of disconnected structure.

Moreover, the practice of self-assessment (including a training session) familiarized students with the marking criteria, thus making their assessment more comparable to teacher assessment. Since marking is a subjective activity, Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling (1997) point out that clear marking criteria give students the opportunity to see how their marks have been calculated. However, they also caution that there could be differences in students’ evaluations as to how well they have performed regardless of the fact they understand the marking criteria. Therefore, in pedagogical practice, students can be involved in the work of assessment in that they are trustable in generating fair marks for their written work. Nevertheless a long period of practice and training is indispensible for the successful implementation of student self-assessment, without which students may not know how to assess their work objectively and accurately.

Disagreement on Vocabulary, Language Use and Mechanics

Disagreement has been found between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on vocabulary, language use and mechanics of both Draft 1 and Draft 2.

The judgments students made about their vocabulary and language use of both Draft 1 and Draft 2 are significantly different from those made by the teacher. This disagreement may be partly due to the low English proficiency of those students involved in this study who are from a higher vocational college. These students, frankly speaking, do not have a very good command of English vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, when assessing their own work, they may not identify every mistake in vocabulary and language use. This is probably the reason why students overrate themselves compared to the teacher. Moreover, the four-week training session seems not to be long enough for students to make objective and accurate judgment about their vocabulary and grammatical quality.
Since linguistic proficiency is linked to the implementation of self-assessment, one of the focuses in the language instruction should be on the improvement of students’ linguistic proficiency. Students may not make significant improvement on vocabulary and language use within a short period of time, but their own awareness, together with teachers’ encouragement and peers’ competition will be the strongest motivation for their learning.

Disagreement has also been found between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on mechanics. There are four possible explanations for this disagreement. First, spelling mistakes frequently appear in the written work of Chinese students. In fact it is not an easy job for Chinese students to memorize thousands of English words in a complete accurate way. What is more, some students are so careless that they misspell some words time and time again. They finally view the misspelt words as right ones and totally take them for granted. Therefore, when they come across the misspelt words written by themselves, they may have difficulty in recognizing them. Second, some students’ handwriting is so illegible that only the writer himself could recognize it, while teachers find it difficult to recognize all the words. For those illegible words, the teachers may regard them as wrong words and assign low marks on the mechanics of the composition. Third, in the traditional writing instruction, what teachers emphasized are the aspects like sentence and paragraph writing, textual organization, and rhetorical devices, etc. However, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are not usually emphasized and discussed thoroughly by teachers in class. These aspects related to mechanics are left to students themselves to grasp. Therefore, students’ negligence in this aspect may cause the disagreement on mechanics between student self-assessment and teacher assessment. Finally, since mechanics accounts for a small proportion of the total (about 5%) in the analytic scoring rubric, students may not pay too much attention on it. Instead they may focus on other four aspects which take a larger proportion of the total value in the scoring rubric, e.g., content holding 30% and organization 20%.

Taking account of the above possible reasons for the disagreement between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on mechanics, teachers may have some additional time and attention to spare on mechanics in the writing instruction. Things like writing conventions, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing need to be discussed in class. Specifically, some effective ways to decrease the number of students’ spelling errors may be employed. Word dictation, classroom quiz of useful words and expressions and the like may highly motivate students to pay more attention to the spelling of words.

Future similar studies may undertake longer-time training and more practice to help assessors to achieve higher degree of accuracy and reduce subjectivity as much as possible.

The Effects of Self-Assessment on Students’ Writing

Results

(1) Results of Analytic Scoring.

Descriptive statistics and the results of the paired samples t-test for Draft 1 (pre-SA) and Draft 2 (post-SA) analytic scores on the total scores and five features are shown in Table 3.

The results reveal that there is a significant difference between pre-SA and post-SA on the total scores ($t = -7.89, p = 0.000$). The mean score for post-SA on total ($M = 71.14$) is much higher than that for pre-SA ($M = 61.83$). This indicates that students made significant progress within the period within which the practice of self-assessment was being carried out.

The respective mean scores for students’ performance on each feature prior to the practice of self-assessment are higher than that after the practice of self-assessment. The results of paired samples t-test
show that there is a significant difference between pre-SA and post-SA on the subscores of content ($t = -3.42, p = 0.002$), organization ($t = -2.45, p = 0.02$) and mechanics ($t = -4.54, p = 0.000$), thus indicating that subjects made significant progress in the aspect of content, organization and mechanics of their compositions within the period within which the practice of self-assessment was being conducted.

However, the results of paired samples $t$-test reveal that there is no significant difference between pre-SA and post-SA on the subscores of vocabulary and language use. In other words, students did not make significant progress in the language use vocabulary and of their writing.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-SA (Draft 1)</th>
<th>Post-SA (Draft 2)</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>19.64</td>
<td>20.94</td>
<td>-3.42</td>
<td>0.002**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>13.78</td>
<td>14.64</td>
<td>-2.45</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>13.06</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>-0.82</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>15.08</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>-1.42</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>-4.54</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61.83</td>
<td>71.14</td>
<td>-7.89</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $^* p < 0.05$; $^{**} p < 0.01$; $^{***} p < 0.001$.

(2) Results from Interviews.

In order to view the findings reported above from a different perspective and to obtain a more comprehensive view of students’ writing over the period of the experiment, student interviews were employed. In the interview, students were asked to talk about their opinions of doing self-assessment. Students generally expressed their feelings of freshness and usefulness of doing self-assessment. For example, here are some of the excerpts from the interview which can exemplify this point.

I think this method is quite new to us. I have never experienced this. Our essays are usually assessed by the teacher. But doing self-assessment makes me know how our essays are marked. I mean I know the procedure and the marking criteria. I think this method is helpful and I like it very much. (Student A)

When I am assigning scores on the five aspects of my essay, I am totally astonished in the poor quality of my essay. I know my writing is poor, but these separate low scores in each aspect are really terrible. (Student B)

I think self-assessment is an effective method because it makes me reread my essays, locate some mistakes and then correct them. Previously when I finished writing my essays, I don’t want to cast a second glance on them. The whole work of assessment is left to the teacher. Even though I got back teacher’s comments, I usually don’t read my essays carefully again. (Student C)

As I am involved in the process of assessing my own work, I felt I have more responsibility for my own learning. I can use self-assessment after class to evaluate my homework. (Student D)

As can been seen from the above excerpts, these students generally hold a positive view towards doing self-assessment. They consider self-assessment as a tool of learning which provides them opportunities to reflect on themselves. As a trial of assessment in writing, students have accepted this new method and noticed the importance and advantages of self-assessment. They believed that the practice of self-assessment can exert beneficial effects on their learning.
Discussion of the Effects of Self-assessment on Students’ Writing

The results gained through quantitative and qualitative methods suggest that self-assessment is an effective strategy in that it can enhance students’ overall writing abilities, especially in terms of content, organization and mechanics.

Students receiving the practice of self-assessment in this study made significant progress in the overall quality of their writing, confirming the findings of some previous studies (Oskarsson, 1989; AlFally, 2004). By means of self-assessment, students not only have a clear understanding of the marking criteria but also consciously attempt to identify the defects in their writing and polish their compositions. Even if they fail to identify every error or inappropriateness, the heightened sense of responsibility and involvement may lead them to make improvement anyway. Moreover, the practice of self-assessment (including the self-assessment training session) contributes to students’ improvement. Just as Boud’s (1995) assertion of the importance of training on students, the benefits of self-assessment seem not to be realized without long period of training and practice. The findings of this research question proved that student should be taught the rules of assessment and given sufficient practice and support in using them.

As is seen from the results of the t-tests, there are significant differences between students’ Draft 1 and Draft 2 on content, organization and mechanics. Improvement in content is first found among the students. Since students have been familiar with the marking criteria, they knew exactly how they were supposed to perform in writing in terms of content. Besides, when students were asked to assess their drafts, they were given the copy of the scoring rubric for reference. Later when students started to revise their drafts, they still kept the scoring rubric at hand. It is natural that they may revise their drafts strictly according to the sequence and descriptions of each aspect of writing. Students may enrich the content by adding some relevant information and details or deleting inadequate ideas.

Improvement in organization is found as well among the subjects. Even though it may be a tough job for students to break through the original framework of their drafts, they have other possible ways to improve the quality of their organization. For instance, the author noticed that students made use of some cohesive devices to display a logical structure and some students expressed their ideas fluently. However, if students want to write essays with more clearly supported ideas, more logical sequencing of sentences and more sophisticated organization of paragraphs, they have to seek assistance from the writing course. Only systematic instruction and practice can offer students greater improvement. Therefore, knowledge concerning the organization of a piece of composition should be one of the focuses for teachers in their writing instruction.

Despite the fact that disagreement has been found between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on mechanics of both Draft 1 and Draft 2, students themselves made some improvements in mechanics in that through doing self-assessment they can detect and correct some, but not all of the errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing. Since errors in this category especially the spelling mistakes are relatively easy to recognize, students may not feel a lot of difficulty in assessing the quality of mechanics in their compositions. However, due to their carelessness and no mastery of the knowledge of mechanics, students may not find out and correct every mistake in mechanics. It is obvious that students would make greater improvement in mechanics if they read their essays more carefully, worked harder on memorizing the spelling of words and paid more attention to their handwriting.
Even though students doing self-assessment practice improved significantly in the content, organization and mechanics of their writing, there is no significant progress found in vocabulary and language use. The possible explanations are stated as follows. First, just as Rome was not built in a day, knowledge of vocabulary and language use are not mastered within a short period of time. This linguistic proficiency can only be achieved through continuous effort. Learners accumulate their knowledge of vocabulary and language use day after day with persistence and determination. The overall research time for this study lasted only eight weeks which are not long enough for students to increase their vocabulary or grammatical knowledge to a significant degree. Therefore students may not show much improvement in vocabulary and language use after the practice of self-assessment. Second, as the meaning of the term “self-assessment” indicates, there is no external stimulus, such as feedback from peers or teachers. The sole reference students make is to themselves. Students do not have a clear idea of how well or how poor they performed on vocabulary or language use as compared with others. In this sense, they are not highly motivated to surpass their peers. This is the limitation of self-assessment as a learning tool. Therefore the improvement in vocabulary and language use is not salient. Finally, there is no additional instruction on vocabulary and language use during the practice of assessment. What students learned in the training session is the general guideline instead of specific details and knowledge. Therefore it is not surprising that students do not make improvement in vocabulary and language use.

The Effects of Self-Assessment on Students’ Perceptions of Their Writing Skills

Results

(1) Results from Questionnaires

Table 4 presents the results of the paired samples t-tests for students’ perceptions of their writing skills before and after the practice of self-assessment.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-SA</th>
<th>Post-SA</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 36</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content (Items 3,4,13,17,21)</td>
<td>14.19</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>14.33</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization (Items 5-8, 14-16)</td>
<td>20.28</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>18.50</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary (Item 19)</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use (Item 18)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics (Items 9,20,22,24)</td>
<td>12.17</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>10.86</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall confidence (Items 1,2)</td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards essay revising (Items 10-12,23)</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

Table 4 reveals several significant differences on organization, language use, mechanics, students’ overall writing confidence and their attitude towards essay revising. Their respective mean scores after the practice of the self-assessment are higher than those prior to it.
However, for the category of content and vocabulary, no significant difference of students’ perceptions prior to and after the practice of self-assessment is found. That is to say, students felt they did not make significant progress in content and vocabulary within the period within which the practice of self-assessment was being conducted.

(2) Results from Interviews

In the interview, four students were asked to talk about their perceptions of their own improvement over the eight-week research time of doing the practice of self-assessment. Students reported the gains they achieved in organizing their texts as well as improvement in language use and mechanics. Here are some of the excerpts from the interview.

I learned a lot during the period of doing self-assessment. For example, I learned from the marking criteria that a well-organized essay should be logical and cohesive. So when I revise my draft, I consciously use some conjunctives to make my composition more logical and cohesive. (Student A)

When I reread and revise my draft, I paid special attention to the aspect of language use in my composition because it takes 25% of the total scores. I am very careful in sentence writing. I read my draft twice and each time I read it carefully in order to avoid some stupid grammatical mistakes. I think I made fewer mistakes of tense and agreement. (Student B)

I know my English is poor. Complex sentences are too difficult for me. So I just try to write simple but correct sentences. (Student C)

I think I paid more attention to my handwriting than before. I have consciousness to write every word clearly because I know from the scoring rubric that illegible handwriting usually annoys the reader and deserves low marks in mechanics of the composition. (Student D)

As can be seen from the above excerpts, these students consider that they have made progress more or less in organization, language use and mechanics of their writing. Even though they just notice a tiny part of the whole picture, this is the beginning of greater progress.

Discussion of the Effects of Self-Assessment on Students’ Perceptions

The results gained through questionnaires and interviews suggest that students change significantly in their perceptions of their own writing skills in organization, language use, mechanics, the overall confidence as well as attitude towards essay revising after the practice of self-assessment.

Students hold a more confidential attitude towards their writing skills in organization, language use and mechanics after the practice of self-assessment, possibly due to their clearer understanding of the scoring rubric. The more they know how they are expected to perform, the closer they head towards that expectation (Ross et al., 1999). In terms of organization, students believed they made some improvements. For example, they thought they tried to make clear transitions between paragraphs and sentences after the practice of self-assessment. What student thought is identical to their actual performance as has been discussed in the second research question in this thesis. As far as language use is concerned, what students perceived is different from their actual performance. In the previous discussion, when comparing students’ Draft 1 and Draft 2, there is no significant difference on the subscores of language use. But students themselves viewed that they did make improvement in this aspect. Possible explanation could be that these students, who come from a vocational college, have a poor mastery of grammatical knowledge. It is not easy for them to correct grammatical mistakes appeared in their writing. In terms of mechanics, students believed they made less spelling mistakes than before. This perception corresponds with what they actually performed in their Drafts 2 after the practice of self-assessment. This improvement indicates that when asked to revise their essays, they have consciousness to detect and
correct misspelt word. Therefore, students generally built more confidence in their writing skills. Even though there is still a long way for them to go, a small forward step may give them encouragement and confidence. Students also hold a positive attitude towards essay revising. They became aware of the importance of essay revising. They thought that the revision of their written work help to improve the quality of their writing.

However, as the results demonstrate, there is no significant difference of students’ perceptions towards content and vocabulary before and after the practice of self-assessment. Students did not think they had improved much in content of their writing. This perception is quite different from what they actually performed in Draft 2. One possible explanation could be that students all have a clear idea that content is the soul of a piece of writing, which takes 30% of the total scores. It is the crucial importance of content that makes students be very careful when making judgments about their own content quality. They may feel they have added some relevant information or examples, but they may not think they have created some new and original ideas. They are too modest to admit their improvements in content. With respect to vocabulary, students did not think they had improved much in vocabulary of their writing. This perception is identical to their actual performance. No difference is found prior to and after the practice of self-assessment in vocabulary. One possible explanation could be that they received no special instruction on vocabulary during such a short period within which the experiment was being conducted.

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

In order to explore the value of implementing self-assessment into English writing instruction, the present study investigated whether and how student self-assessment affects EFL writers (non-English majors). The major findings of this study are summarized as follows.

Agreement has been found between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on the total scores awarded to the same compositions both prior to and after the practice of self-assessment. Besides, consistency between student self-assessment and teacher assessment exists in their marks for content and organization. However, there is significant disagreement between student self-assessment and teacher assessment on vocabulary, language use, and mechanics of the writing.

The practice of self-assessment helps students better the overall quality of their writing, which is indicated by the higher total scores of students’ writing after the practice of self-assessment. It is found that students made significant improvements in content, organization, and mechanics of their writing after the practice of self-assessment. Though students made some improvements in vocabulary and language use after the practice of self-assessment, these improvements did not arrive at a statistically significant level.

The practice of self-assessment has exerted positive influence on students’ perceptions of their writing skills in organization, language use, and mechanics. Students personally believe that their writing skills especially in terms of organization, language use, and mechanics are better after the practice of self-assessment. Therefore a higher writing confidence is generated among the students. However, students do not think they have improved much in content and vocabulary in their writing. Moreover, students generally hold a positive attitude towards the use of revision in their writing. They think the revision of their written work may help to improve the quality of their compositions. Finally, students’ perceptions of their writing skills in organization, mechanics and vocabulary after the practice of self-assessment are consistent with their actual writing performance. Students think their writing skills in organization and mechanics have been improved after the
practice of self-assessment. This perception is consistent with students’ actual performance which is indicated by the discussion of the second research question in this thesis, since students actually do make improvement in organization and mechanics of their writing. In terms of vocabulary, there is no significant change in students’ perceptions after the practice of self-assessment. This perception corresponds to students’ actual writing performance in vocabulary in which no significant difference is found after the practice of self-assessment. However, there is a certain extent of disagreement between students’ perceptions of their content and language use and their actual writing performance after the practice of the self-assessment.

**Implications of the Study**

These findings provide several possible pedagogical implications.

In the process approach to second language writing instruction, writing is not viewed as a product-oriented activity, but rather a nonlinear and recursive process, in which students are encouraged to revise as they write and to produce multiple drafts of their written work (Connor & Farmer, 1990). In the present study, students revised their essays under the stimulus of the practice of self-assessment. With the help of the scoring rubric and the assigned marks, students clearly know which part of their essays need to be revised, thus making the job of revision more effective.

As a kind of formative assessment, self-assessment can be a powerful and guiding force in the learning/teaching process. Breen and Candlin (1980) ever commented “Judgments are a crucial part of knowledge, learning and any educational process” (p. 105). Therefore, learners’ participation in self-assessment is of vital importance. In self-assessment, learners not only simply provide output, but also are invited to enquire into the process of their learning. Although under the direction of the teacher, their active involvements make them become partners in the pedagogic enterprise (Widdowson, 1990).

Pedagogically, when implementing the practice of self-assessment, it is important to make students fully understand the marking criteria designed for their compositions. These marking criteria may be written by well-known experts. But it would be better if students themselves had been involved in defining the criteria that would be used to evaluate their writing, because defining the marking criteria helps students to understand the criteria explicitly. The most common technique is to have students brainstorm potential criteria. The teacher records all the suggestions, adds her own suggestion, and groups students’ ideas into appropriate categories. Students then vote on which criteria are most important. The teacher assembles students’ ideas into a rubric for assessing performance. This rubric may be progressively refined later. With regard to the scoring rubric, analytic scoring is preferable compared with holistic scoring because the former one is aimed to evaluate an essay form a number of distinct features and it can at least give some insight into the particular strengths and weaknesses of the essays to the evaluator. That is to say, diagnostic information of the essays is offered. Therefore, students will be clearer about what they are expected to achieve in their writings.

Once the rubric or the criteria have been established, an effective training on how to apply the criteria to assess the written work will be carried out on students. The training is necessary for the successful practice of self-assessment. The teacher models the application of the criteria and students practice assessing their own essays. During the practice, teachers need to give students feedback on the accuracy of their assessment. Conferences with individual students may be conducted.

The implementation of self-assessment challenges teachers a lot. Teachers need to devote more to developing students’ ability of providing feedback for themselves. Helping students to be independent writers
is of ultimate benefit to the students themselves. Besides, teachers should interact more with students and get more information about their strengths and weaknesses in learning. Therefore, appropriate change of the focus in the instructions may be made according to the need of the students.

Limitations of the Study

This study intends to explore the possible effects of self-assessment on students’ writing. Although some results have been found which proves that the effects of self-assessment are positive, limitations of this study have also been identified.

First, the study was conducted to examine only two drafts of the written assignment. No more draft or assignment is required. As a result, the changes between two drafts may not be persuasive enough.

Second, the study lasted only eight weeks, within which four weeks are spent on self-assessment training. The insufficient period of training and practice may influence the results of the study.

Finally, the study only involves a total subject of 36 second-year non-English majors, which is of a small size and may be not representative enough.

Due to several weaknesses in the research design, the results can only be regarded as tentative and some difficult issues have not yet been tackled adequately. These issues are still open to further extensive study.

The author believes that the findings of this study have demonstrated that Chinese non-English majors can improve their writings if they are exposed to appropriate self-assessment. Future study would need to be undertaken to see if these findings also apply to Chinese English majors or learners at other proficiency levels, since learner ability to respond to the defects in writing is closely linked to language proficiency.

References


### Table A1

**ESL Composition Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-27</td>
<td>Excellent — Very Good: knowledgeable; substantive; thorough development of thesis; relevant to assigned topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-22</td>
<td>Good — Average: some knowledge of subject; adequate range; limited development of thesis; mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-17</td>
<td>Fair — Poor: limited knowledge of subject; little substance; inadequate development of topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-13</td>
<td>Very Poor: does not show knowledge of subject; non-substantive; not pertinent; or not enough to evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-18</td>
<td>Excellent — Very Good: fluent expression; ideas clearly stated/supported; succinct; well-organized; logical sequencing; cohesive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-14</td>
<td>Good — Average: somewhat choppy; loosely organized but main ideas stand out; limited support; logical but incomplete sequencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-10</td>
<td>Fair — Poor: non-fluent; ideas confused or disconnected; lacks logical sequencing and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-7</td>
<td>Very Poor: does not communicate; no organization; or not enough to evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-18</td>
<td>Excellent — Very Good: sophisticated range; effective word/idiom choice and usage; word form mastery; appropriate register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-14</td>
<td>Good — Average: adequate range; occasional errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage but meaning not obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-10</td>
<td>Fair — Poor: limited range; frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage; meaning confused or obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-7</td>
<td>Very Poor: essentially translation; little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form; or not enough to evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Use</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-22</td>
<td>Excellent — Very Good: effective complex constructions; few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-18</td>
<td>Good — Average: effective but simple constructions; minor problems in complex constructions; several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-11</td>
<td>Fair — Poor: major problems in simple/complex constructions; frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and/or fragments, run-ons, deletions; meaning confused or obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-6</td>
<td>Very Poor: virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules; dominated by errors; does not communicate; or not enough to evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Excellent — Very Good: demonstrates mastery of conventions; few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Good — Average: occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing but meaning not obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fair — Poor: frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing; poor handwriting; meaning confused or obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Very Poor: no mastery of conventions; dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing; handwriting illegible; or not enough to evaluate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Source: Jacobs et al., 1981.*
Appendix B

John Hedgecock’ Academic Writing Self-Assessment Instrument
(as cited in Bailey, 1998, p. 236)

Name __________

Directions: this instrument is designed to help you and your instructor understand the ways in which you feel you have improved as a writer of academic English. It is also designed to assess the extent to which you feel this course has met its stated goals. Please be frank: Your honest response will give your instructor valuable information.

1 = Strongly agree 2 = Agree 3 = Somewhat agree
4 = Somewhat disagree 5 = Disagree 6 = Strongly disagree

1. I am becoming a more skilled writer of academic English.
2. I am gaining confidence as a writer of academic English.
3. I have developed new ways of using source material (e.g., textbooks, scholarly books, journal articles, newspaper and newsmagazine articles, etc) effectively in my writing assignments.
4. I am getting better at producing interesting and original ideas.
5. I am gaining skill at organizing my ideas and putting them together logically.
6. I am more comfortable rearranging ideas and paragraphs as I plan and revise my work.
7. I have developed new strategies for composing thesis statements and arguments.
8. My reading in this course and my major courses has helped me to see new ways of organizing text and using language.
9. My typing and computer skills have become more efficient.
10. As I revise my papers, I am now more likely to add new material.
11. When I write and revise a paper, I think more carefully about what my reader wants to know from me.
12. I am more comfortable about getting feedback from my peers.
13. I am more likely to support my claims with examples and explanations than I used to be.
14. I now try to make clear and succinct transitions between paragraphs.
15. I have developed strategies for linking my paragraphs to my thesis.
16. In my concluding paragraphs, I understand the need to synthesize my thesis and the evidence I’ve presented in the body of my paper.
17. The paragraphs of my papers usually contain plenty of examples and/or explanations.
18. When I turn in papers, they have fewer grammatical errors than they did before this course.
19. My use of English vocabulary has expanded in my writing over the course of this semester.
20. My papers now contain fewer errors in spelling and punctuation than they did previously.
21. When I write an academic paper, I am now comfortable using references, quotations, footnotes, bibliographic sources, etc.
22. When I turn in papers, they have fewer errors of spelling or punctuation.
23. I am better able to understand and incorporate the instructor’s comments into my revised writing.
24. I have acquired useful and efficient strategies for writing under timed conditions.