

A CRITICAL REVIEW ON LEARNING TO SELF-ASSESS ORAL PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH: A LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDY, BY YUH-MEI CHEN, (2008)

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a journal article entitled Learning to self-assess oral performance in English: a longitudinal case study, by Yuh-Mei Chen (2008)¹. The article is published in 'Language Teaching Research', Volume 12, No. 2, 235-262. This study was carried out in National Chung Cheng University, Chia-yi, in Taiwan. Chen examined her Chinese students' ability to self-assess their oral performance in English. She compared the students' self-assessment with the teacher's assessment and focused on their development. The aim of this paper is to critically review Chen's article in terms of the positive and negative aspects of the written work. This evaluation is divided into sections in order to cover the different points raised and to assess each part individually.

INTRODUCTION

Constant developments in the field of language learning have led researchers to consider self-assessment as an important tool in acquiring a foreign language and in encouraging learners to achieve autonomy. In this respect, many studies have looked at this concept from different angles. Most studies on self-assessment focus only on comparing student- and teacher-generated marks, and most have not taken the development of the students during the assessment process into account. Obviously, this has led the author to investigate the students' development during the assessment process. In this longitudinal study, Chen sought to measure the participants' progress during their involvement in the assessment cycle. This kind of study enabled the author to differentiate between real and chance changes as noted by Cohen et al. (2000). Chen stated this clearly in the abstract which gives the reader a clear picture about what the study aims to accomplish.

Before analysing the literature, I would like to offer a quick overview of the study abstract. Chen provides us with a clear and easy to follow abstract. She briefly states the purpose of the study,

¹ Chen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Chung Cheng University, Chia-yi, Taiwan. Her research interests are writing instruction, English testing and assessment, and professional development (http://www.asian-e-fl-journal.com/March_06_ymc.php).

the participants, offers a description of the assessment process and finally details the findings and the outcomes of the study. The abstract gives the reader a comprehensible idea about what the paper involves. With regard to the literature review, generally it has many functions such as providing the reader with a historical background about the subject and clarifying the value of the study under consideration. Moreover, it ‘...has to cover a vast amount of material in a very concise fashion’ (Yang and Miller, 2008: 62). Concerning this study, the author logically introduces the topic of the research and illustrated the features of self-assessment supported by some evidence. Then she describes the nature of the participants and considers similar studies with a critical evaluation of each. It can be said that although the author used these studies to support her points, she states some drawbacks. For example, she claims that Littlewood’s study (1999), did not mention if the participants received training before collecting their reports as this might have affected the findings. The second example was the author’s own study which was conducted in 2006. Though the findings of both studies were similar, the author claimed that she had only focused on the comparison between the students’ and the teachers’ marks and neglected the students’ development and progression in the assessment period. After that, the author established the significance of study under consideration which focused on the development of the students. She smoothly moved from general to specific information. That is, from the meaning of self-assessment, to the focus of her study.

On the one hand, Chen successfully convinces the reader of the significance of self-assessment as part of autonomous learning. This is achieved by the use of a well-organised structure and clearly stated knowledge. On the other hand, the author does not provide evidence that specifically examines the self-assessment of oral performance. Moreover, the author points out many features and characteristics of self-assessment as a learning tool, however, there are some essential facts which are absent from the review and need to be provided for the reader. More concisely, as part of self-assessment, there are some problems and disadvantages that have been highlighted by other scholars such as the objectivity of evaluation, the validity of self- and peer- assessment and learner training (Lim, 2007). In addition, Patri (2002) stressed that assessment is a subjective activity, yet the author solely focused on the benefits and advantages of the self- assessment process. This contradicts with Taylor and Pocter (2008) who argue that a good review of the literature should present a comprehensive review of the topic including the disadvantages.

METHODOLOGY

In the participants’ section, the author offers us limited information about the participants. She illustrates that the participants were twenty-eight Chinese post-graduate students. They were asked to rate their linguistic ability level on a 5-point scale. Probably, it would have been helpful if the reader had been informed about the actual English level of the participants. It seems that not all of them were English majors. This being the case, there may be variability in their levels

which I think might affect the result. Furthermore, the ages of the participants need to be known as it might affect the assessment process. In addition, many researchers (e.g. Cohen et al. 2000 and Punch 2005) have stressed the need to have permission for any intended study in order to protect the human right of the participants. Yet the author does not mention whether or not the participants had been informed about the conducted study as this might be considered a breach of ethics.

Speaking of the instruments, the author used evaluation forms and a questionnaire to gather data. The assessment criteria and components were created jointly by the students and their teacher. However, there were some hidden problems that were found in this article. Concerning the evaluation forms, although the author clearly divides the components of the criteria into language, content, delivery and manner, and illustrates what was meant by each of them in the appendices, she does not state the reason for allocating only 10% for the manner, and 30% for each of the others. As a matter of fact, the author successfully organised the evaluation form and gives brief descriptions of the assessment standards and the elements of the criteria. With regard to the questionnaire, it includes three parts and is written in two languages - English and Chinese. The author made a good point by disturbing the questionnaire items in both languages, in order to avoid vagueness and confusion. This point is admitted McDonough and McDonough (1997: 178) who also stressed the need to have 'an independent person [to] translate [the questionnaire] back into the original language as a check on the comparability of the translated version.'

In addition, the author (p.241) alleges that "...the questionnaire contained three parts". Nevertheless, she only describes the first one which was based on Chen (2006), in order to find out whether or not the students practiced self-assessment. The second one was adapted from Falchikov's (1986) work and was used to ascertain the students' perceptions of the benefits of self-assessment. However, by having a look at the questionnaire table on page 250-251, it can be clearly be seen that the author described the second part while she meant the third; the second part was about the nature of self-assessment which was ignored by the author in the questionnaire description. The third part was about the benefits of self-assessment which was adapted from Falchikov (ibid.) and described as the second. Furthermore, the questionnaire made use of a Likert scale² which is believed to have two drawbacks. First, in some cases it is hard to interpret the midpoint whether because the statements do not relate to the participants' interest or the question is not relevant. Second, agreement differs from one person to another. In this respect, I think the author needs to reconsider the type of questionnaire in order to help the participants answer the questions openly and more flexibly. Additionally, the author did not attach the questionnaire form in the appendices.

² Likert scale '...presents not questions but statements and asks for degree of agreement. These are often to elicit opinions rather than facts and are sometimes called 'opinionaires' (McDonough and McDonough, 1997: 176).

With regard to the procedure, the author starts this section by stating some potential problems and offering ready-made solutions to deal with these problems. Chen highlighted only three of them and ignored other crucial ones which have emerged in the field of self-assessment. For instance, Dickinson (1987) asserted that students' feelings and emotions can have a large impact on their assessment. Moreover, Miller and Ng (1996) alleged that sometimes the students lack the linguistic ability to evaluate their peers, which might stand as a barrier to accurate assessment, but the author did not consider these points. Then she describes the whole training process with regard to the assessment process. The participants received two weeks training before assessing themselves which included two videotaped observations. Chen used this technique to help the participants practice assessing others before their actual assessment for their oral performance. Apparently, using videotaping as an effective tool with which to help learners evaluate their performances has been accepted by many researchers such as Bankston and Terlip (1994) and Hinton and Cramer (1998). In contrast, Mallard and Quintanilla (2007:4) argued that "There is limited and mixed research on the effectiveness of this practice". These claims can be seen in a similar study conducted by Lim (2007) who found that, after the assessment process, the participants had difficulties in assessing themselves and their peers. In addition, some of the participants mentioned that two weeks training were not enough to equip learners to self-assess. In light of this debate, the author did not provide any consideration for the students' levels and feelings during and after the assessment process.

Moreover, the author, in the section entitled *Factors affecting self-assessment* mentions that Orsmond (2002) asserted the usefulness of using 'examples and formative feedback... [To] help students demonstrate greater understanding of both marking criteria and subject standards...' (p.239). Nevertheless, Chen in the procedures section says nothing about whether or not she used this technique with the participants. Another crucial point is that self-assessment should be done prior to peer-assessment. Brindley and Scoffield (1998) strongly advocated that self-assessment should be practiced before assessing others because this will make the students understand the criteria and give more accurate feedback. However, in contrast, Chen overlooked this point and asked the participants to evaluate their peers and themselves at the same time.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The author uses multiple methods to conduct this study. This collection, using different methods, broadly strengthens the data and provides consistent results as noted by Bell (1993). In this study, Chen uses quantitative data which were collected from scores of assessment and questionnaire responses; the scores are analysed using the Spearman correlation test and the Wilcoxon match-pairs signed-ranks test, while the Chi-square test is used to analyse the questionnaire. Furthermore, the author mentions that qualitative data such as evaluation forms and interviews were used. However, there is no mention of interviews, neither in the assessment process nor in the results. Many researchers such as Punch (2005) and Denscombe (2007) have

asserted that using quantitative and qualitative data helps the author to investigate the issues from different points of view.

Generally, it can be said that, by using these methods the author has achieved methodological triangulation since she combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in one study. Working in parallel, this should give more accurate results as indicated by Punch (2005). Therefore, the author has successfully combined different methods and has specifically described how and when she used them during the assessment process. In fact, by using methodological triangulation in the study, reliability is likely to be high. The author has adopted different sources and has analysed the results by using different kinds of tests. In addition, during the assessment procedures, the students were fully involved in the process. They observed different performances, discussed their reactions to peers, reflected on the self-assessment of their performances and responded to feedback. Obviously, such engagement for the participants in the process ensured the validity in this study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this section the author is very clear and direct in discussing her findings. All the information seems straightforward to follow. The author comprehensibly informs the reader about the whole process, starting with the purpose of the study and concluding with the outcomes. In addition, Chen provides an organised conclusion which neatly includes implications and suggestions for improvement. She used words such as first, second, third in order to organise her points into paragraphs, and each one talks about one idea. All the implications provided in the conclusion are based on evidence which has resulted in a well organised and coherent structure.

Furthermore, the author provides a list of references for all the sources used, arranged in alphabetical order and attached at the end of the study. Additionally, the in-text citations are very effective and support the author's ideas. With regard to the appendices, Chen attaches an evaluation form and coding examples of students' and teachers' comments. It is very helpful for the reader to look at the comments that were generated by the students and their teachers during the process. However it would have been more valuable if the author had stated her comments parallel with those of the students. It was hard to know how a student was evaluated by him/herself and by the teacher. In this case, the author randomly selected some comments from the students' evaluation form and from hers, so it was not easy to identify the differences in their evaluation as mentioned in the results.

Overall, the article seems to be easy to follow. It follows the typical organisation of such articles i.e. introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion and conclusion. The author's research interests are English testing and assessment, writing instruction and professional development (EFL Journal, 2008). She has many published works and extensive experience in self-assessment which makes her well-qualified and knowledgeable in this field. The use of

transition words and phrases at the beginning of each paragraph makes the reader aware of what that part will be about. Given this information, the author's writing is very clear and consistent in presenting relevant points and in supporting them with other research. However, some drawbacks have been revealed in this study and have been mentioned in this paper.

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