A switch to the new paradigm: Teachers’ views and attitudes towards self-assessment

Ett paradigmskifte: Lärares synsätt och attityder i förhållande till självbedömning

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Preface

The following dissertation was written together by Andrew Westlake & Lovrenc Zitko. It should, however, be noted that some sections were more influenced by one of the authors. The introduction, methodology, results and conclusion were influenced by Andrew, whereas the results and analysis, theory, and discussion sections were influenced more by Lovrenc. We would, however, like to stress that this dissertation was a joint collaboration in which both authors played an equal role in its production.

Abstract

The study that has been undertaken sets out to explore teacher attitudes towards the subject of self-assessment. It also aims at finding out specific strategies and tools used, and what the teachers feel would aid with the promotion and implementation of self-assessment in the modern language classroom.

To this end we conducted a number of interviews, in the south of Sweden, with teachers of varying experience who actively practice self-assessment in their classrooms. The teachers were positive to the concept of self-assessment, but stressed a number of areas that presented problems, available time and the ambiguity of the syllabi being examples. They adopted a number of strategies in order to overcome these problems. Furthermore, they identified a number of key advantages in using the approach, both from their perspective and that of the students’. It strengthens student confidence, clarifies goals and promotes active learning.

Keywords: Self-assessment, teaching practices, learner autonomy
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1 Introduction

Imagine that you have just received a piece of work back from your teacher. What is the first thing, as a student, that you would look for? If you are the same as a majority of students, we would surmise that you would have responded with ‘the grade’. However, what does this single mark tell us? Does it give us any indication about where we find ourselves in respect to the overall goals for the course, or in fact the specific goals for the task? Is it anything more than a signifier of how well we did at a specific time? Would you ask yourself the question, does the grade given concur with the expectations you had based on your own abilities and efforts? Indeed, what are your own expectations based on? Are they carefully formulated ones based on a dialogue between you and your teacher, or are they just what you feel your work was worth?

1.1 Background

During our time in teacher training we have asked ourselves how students could become more aware of their own learning process and progress. With the paradigm shift witnessed in education, we believe that the move away from summative ways of assessment to formative assessment could lead to students’ better understanding of the process of how to learn rather than what is expected to be learnt. We feel a reliance on a more summative assessment is misguided as this form of assessment is not wholly in line with the guidelines set out in the governing documents for schools, either at a curriculum level, or the level of the syllabus. While, ultimately, summative grades are to be given to students, we feel that the process involved in the obtaining of these grades can be of equal importance. Therefore, a formative process in the summative system is, we feel, the best current approach.

The curriculum and syllabi reflect this idea and promote the development of learner autonomy, and a need for the assessment of students to be a part of the learning process. In this way the focus of learning is on developing a meta-cognitive skill, which questions how pupils learn, in order to learn through an ongoing process with the help of the teacher and tools such as language portfolio. The intentions and goals of developing an all round communicative and functional competence for learners are a result of the shift from the focus of the teacher to the active learning processes of the pupil. The communicative ideal as it is
stated in the syllabus for English and The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, therefore raises the question of the ways to promote language learning and language awareness.

The National curricula for the compulsory and non-compulsory school, Lpo 94 and Lpf 94, state that every pupil should strive towards developing the ability of assessing their own results and put their own and others assessment in relation to their own efforts and the set requirements (National Agency for Education 1994, p. 16; National Agency for Education 1994, p. 15). In order for pupils to be able to understand what is demanded of them they have to develop the ability to reflect over their own learning. Moreover, it is stated in the syllabus for English for the compulsory school (National Agency for Education, 2000) that teaching should aim for pupils to develop the ability to reflect and take responsibility for their own learning and consciously use ways of working that promotes learning. In addition, research has shown that teachers’ ways of teaching English depend on traditions, competence and choice of text books and other teaching aids, and that the level of attaining the goals set out in the governing documents regarding all round communicative ability in the classroom is proof of an inbuilt didactical problem (National Agency for Education, 2008, p. 39). That is to say, many of the students are not reaching the goals concerned with this ability to reflect and take responsibility for their own learning. Pupils with good communicative skills, but with less analytical ability to assess their own knowledge and abstract thinking with regard to the structure of the language, tend to be at a disadvantage when compared to their peers. This causes them to lose their motivation, and they feel that they only show what they cannot do instead of what they can do. What is needed is a broader perspective where assessment leads to a more all round feedback to achieve results for all language abilities (ibid, p. 49).

Pupils’ self-assessment is also a part of the learning process. However, the report from NU-03, the National Evaluation of the Compulsory School in 2003, clearly reveals that tests and assessment of what a learner is able to do is still a matter for the teacher to judge (cited in National Agency for Education 2008). Also, it clearly shows that teachers’ working practices are rarely questioned by the pupils. The national curriculum states that pupils should gradually increase their influence of their own education (ibid, p. 51), meaning that the teaching should promote pupils ability to reflect and assess their own work and results. National Agency for Education (2008, p. 51) refers to Oscarson (1998), who stresses that the development of competences for self-assessment constitutes important strategies towards the
set goals of what to learn. Furthermore, pupils who cannot plan their own work, and assess their own capabilities and progress, have the least chance to find the most efficient ways to learn.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions.

The self-assessment of students is an area of great importance in the educational domain. As has been shown there are very definite requirements placed on teachers through the governing documents to implement certain strategies for the use of self-assessment. The National Agency for Education (2005) stresses that assessment should be integrated in the learning process and that because it enables both student and teacher to understand how goals are met (p. 2). With this in mind we feel it is of the utmost importance to study the views, attitudes and practices of self-assessment in order to comply with the aforementioned requirements of practicing teachers. Previous research suggests that teachers feel that the implementation of self-assessment is difficult to translate from theory into practice (ibid).

The specific research questions for this paper are as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of the teachers studied towards self-assessment?

2. What strategies and tools do the teachers use to implement self-assessment in their classrooms?

3. What do teachers feel is needed to aid and support the implementation of self-assessment?

These questions have been formulated in order to enable this study to become a basis of discussion around the subject of attitudes to self-assessment.

1.3 Assessment: a definition.

The term assessment in this paper refers to what Brindley calls “a variety of ways of collecting information on a learner’s language ability or achievement” (Brindley 2001, p.
Furthermore, assessment can be broken down into many different areas. However, for the purpose of this study it will be broken down into 2 major categories. Firstly there is summative assessment, or assessment of learning, this is assessment as a gauge of knowledge at a specific time. Harmer (2007) says of this form “[s]ummative assessment […] is the kind of measurement that takes place to round things off or make a one-off measurement” (p. 379). Secondly there is formative assessment, or assessment for learning which “is used to gauge progression in skills, concepts and knowledge in order to provide direct feedback to learners on their progress, development and quality of learning” (Bartlett et al. 2006, p. 78).

1.4 A paradigm shift in assessing students’ ability

With the introduction of Lpo 94 and Lpf 94 there has been a shift in the general paradigm in education. This has been reflected in the ideas behind the assessment of students. The following figure (Figure 1.) shows us the shift that has occurred from the traditional forms of assessment into what is termed alternative, authentic, or informal assessment. These new ideas focus on a more holistic approach to learning and using language. Tests that teach are the fundamental building blocks of a course based on formative assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old paradigm</th>
<th>New paradigm</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Focus on Language</td>
<td>1. Focus on communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teacher centered</td>
<td>2. Learner centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Isolated skills</td>
<td>3. Integrated skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emphasis on product</td>
<td>4. Emphasis on process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. One answer, one way correctness</td>
<td>5. Open-ended, multiple solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tests that test</td>
<td>6. Tests that teach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Old and new thoughts on assessment: Source Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 335*

Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 336) suggest alternative assessment provides teachers with the type of information about what the students can do in their second language rather than just measuring the outcome of students’ performance. Tools, such as portfolios and journals, help learners to take charge of their own learning. Despite this there is still a need for teacher intervention and, when giving feedback, Ana Huerta-Macías (Richards and Renandya 2002)
argues that alternative assessment consists of valid and reliable procedures that look at actual performance. The benefit of using alternative assessment, instead of traditional summative assessment, is that it reflects the curriculum implemented in the classroom, and provides multiple indices that gauge student progress (p. 339).

Alternative forms of assessment also have the benefit of allowing the students to gain ownership of their own work. If the teacher becomes the only reader, and assessor of, for example a piece written work, the student might perceive assessment as something that only concerns the teacher (Richards and Renandya 2002, pp. 345-346, 348). This means that assessment is a process of finding out who the students are, what they need to know, and how they perceive the learning will affect them. In order to make students aware of their own abilities the concept of learner autonomy, a process that enables learners to assess their own needs by choosing and applying their own learning strategies and styles, is needed which eventually leads to the effective management of learning.

2. Self-assessment theory and research

This section will look at the concept of self-assessment from a theoretical point of view. We will first place it in the context of formative assessment, look at its theoretical background, its function in the classroom and previous research respectively.

2.1 Self-assessment: a theoretical background

Formative assessment is a continuous process which “forms […] an integrated part of learning and happens continuously in close cooperation between student and teacher” [translation our own] (National Agency for Education, 2008, p. 55). As a part of the formative process, self-assessment by students is of great importance.

In order to take the step from formative feedback to self-assessment Sadler (1989) argues that 3 criteria are required. Firstly: the student must understand what is required of themself. Secondly: the student must be familiar with the domain or genre in order to be able to take a step ‘beyond’ it. Finally: the students should be free to choose their own strategies in order to “bring their performances closer to the goal, that is to self-assess their work” (Oscarsson 2009, p. 83).
Perhaps the most pertinent theory that forms the basis of self-assessment is that of reflexivity. This is an area in which John Dewey's ideas are of vital importance. His idea was that students should be given the opportunity to learn through their own experiences. This was to be achieved by letting the students learn according to their own interests and needs (Oscarsson 2009, p. 34). Oscarsson argues that these, more student-centered ideas require reflection, something that Dewey himself also advocated. In fact Dewey says this of the concept: “While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habit of reflecting” (Dewey, 1933, p. 35). This is obviously linked to the function of self-assessment, as the student’s reflection about where they are in relation to the goals set out by the teachers, or syllabus, is of fundamental importance. This reflection increases awareness, and encourages responsibility within the student. However, it is not easy to evaluate your own abilities and achievements as a student. In order to do so the syllabus’ view of English and its goals have to be understood by both teacher and student (Lundahl, 2009, p. 312).

Within Dewey's ideas, the concept of social constructivism can also be seen. Constructivist views are grounded in the principle that learners actively construct their own understandings in interaction between themselves, their surroundings and others. Dysthe (1996) says, “[according to Bakhtin] we can never perceive ourselves as a whole if we do not relate ourselves to the other, and we can only get an insight to ourselves through communication with others” [translation our own] (p. 63). The over-riding ideas in the constructivist school are those of Lev Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky (1978, referenced in National Agency for Education, 2005 p. 3) learning occurs in the space between what the student knows and what the student is capable of comprehending. This is otherwise known as the zone of proximal development, or ZPD. The National Agency of Education say of this “Self-assessment practices can play an important part in developing understanding from new experiences which the student encounters in the classroom situation” [translation our own] (ibid).

In the classroom context, this means that knowledge cannot be explicitly taught, rather the teacher acts as a mediator guiding students to learning (Oscarsson 2009, p. 36). This also implies that the students must have a degree of self-awareness so “the learner is able to regulate and evaluate the learning process him- or herself” (ibid). Of course, the development
of meta-cognitive skills is vital in order for this to take place. This means, according to Piaget, the individual reaches a point at which they become aware of their own learning, a point that he called “The cognitive level of “formal operations’” (ibid), in other words a meta-cognitive level. In their chapter Black & Wiliam tell us that self-assessment is essential in the process of developing these meta-cognitive skills, and the role of the teacher as scaffold, making goals clearly visible for students is an important step in developing “their capacity for meta-cognitive thinking” (Gardner. Ed. 2006, p. 15). However, it cannot be said that meta-cognitive skills, in and of themselves, are enough for learning to take place. There are many other factors which come into play. Two of the most important other factors are student and teacher beliefs.

Insofar as student belief is concerned, Shunk comments that “students’ beliefs about their capabilities to apply effectively the knowledge and skills they already possess and thereby learn new cognitive skills [are vitally important]” (Shunk, 1989, p. 129 cited in Oscarsson, 2009, p. 41), that is to say learner belief is closely related to the level of their meta-cognitive skills and how they are used.

While learners’ beliefs affect the individual learners, teacher beliefs can affect the whole classroom environment. “The explicit and implicit messages that teachers convey about what they consider important and successful learning, affect their learners’ developing thoughts of themselves as learners as well as their progress” (Wigfield & Harold, 1992 cited in Oscarsson 2009, p. 43). Also, discrepancies between teacher and student beliefs may arise: “Students may for example misunderstand teachers’ goals, which can cause the students’ own attempts at planning and goal setting to be unsuccessful by the teacher’s definition” (Oscarsson, 2009, p. 44). This can mean that the student believes that it is useless to try to formulate his, or her, own goals (ibid).
2.2 Self-assessment in the classroom

In their model (see Figure 2) for how self-evaluation contributes to learning Rolheiser and Ross (n.d) say that an upward cycle of learning is created when students evaluate their performance positively. This encourages students to set higher (1) goals and commit more personal resources or effort (2) to them. Furthermore, this model stresses the importance of the combination of goals (1) and effort (2) that leads to achievement (3). A student questions whether the set goals were met, as a result of a self-judgment (4) of his or her own achievement. The result of this self-judgment is self-reaction (5), where the student responds to the judgment with the question: How do I feel about that? Goals, effort, achievement, self-judgement and self-reaction can all combine to impact self-confidence (6) in a positive way. Through this model Rolheiser and Ross show how self-judgment and self-reaction are components of self-evaluation that students should be taught to use in order to promote better learning.

In order to teach students to use self-evaluation, according to Rolheiser (1996), four different stages are required. The first stage is to involve students in defining the criteria for the goals that they are supposed to achieve. Here the teacher needs to help the student set goals...
(Rolheiser & Ross, n.d, para. 16). After the negotiation stage, students must know how to apply these goals to their own work, and to understand what this means in practice. The different criteria for the goals are then explained by the teacher through examples and models. Thirdly, students need to get feedback on their self-evaluations as students’ ideas about how to apply the criteria are likely to be imperfect. Therefore, teachers need to alter students own understanding of how to implement the set criteria. The final stage focuses on the importance of helping the students to set new goals and levels of effort through support. This support consists of the teacher looking at the level of achievement in relation to the learning strategies adopted by the student (ibid).

2.3 Previous research

There has been little research regarding self-assessment practices in Primary, Secondary and Upper Secondary education, according to Oscarsson (2009, p. 67). She notes that most research has been carried out at the adult level, and that the focus of the research has been mainly the accuracy of self-assessment (ibid). For example Von Elek (1985) found that there was a strong relationship between the students’ assessment of themselves and the instructors’ assessment of their work (Oscarsson, 2009, p. 67). Ross in a similar research project also found a good correlation between the students’ assessments of themselves and their teachers’. He also found that the level of experience in performing self-assessment has an effect upon the outcomes of the assessment “the degree of experience learners bring to the self-assessment context influences the accuracy of the product” (Ross 1998, p. 16).

In connection to experience, the National Agency for Education (1998) found that the longer students have been in school, the less weight they place on the teacher’s assessment, because, according to Upper Secondary students, “the teacher’s assessment often is based upon how good their grammar and spelling is, and not on the communicative aspects of the language” [translation our own] (National Agency for Education, 1998, pp. 126-127). This brings up another important aspect of self-assessment: that of feedback from the teacher. According to Stefani (1998) “Too many teachers believe that a grade, a comment, or a word of praise or blame are enough, when in actual fact students want information specifically linked to their performance and guidance on what they should do to improve” (p. 348 cited in Oscarsson 2009, p. 81). This implies that feedback from the teacher should be task specific and should pinpoint to the specific student how to take the step to the next level. In fact Taras (2001) goes as far as to say
“experience has shown that the grade interferes with students’ judgments and prevents them from focusing on their work” (p. 609).

Whenever there is a dialogue between the teacher and students regarding assessment, it should be “a positive, informative and fair experience where their own [the students’] views are taken into account” (Oscarsson, 2009, p233). She also found that “[s]elf-assessment practice together with teacher feedback strengthened the agreement between the student groups’ and teachers’ assessments, as well as between individual students’ and teachers’ assessment” (ibid, p. 232). Furthermore, she notes that there is an intrinsic value in offering feedback where students have to identify areas of weakness for themselves. This in turn has the effect of reducing the reliance of the student upon the teacher and contributes to autonomous learning and self-assessment. She sums this up by saying:

[…] the results seem to indicate that it is not a question of the teacher correcting language mistakes or not, but a matter of students’ understanding of where their formal language structures break down, of the understanding of the consequences for communication, and of helping the students resolve the issues from their own comprehension (Oscarsson, 2009, p. 233).
3. Methodology

Since this study focuses on the views and attitudes of teachers, as can be seen in the research questions for this paper in section 1.2, a qualitative approach is the most suitable method. Questionnaires would not give the qualitative information we require, so this method has not been pursued. The choice of qualitative interviews, or as Dörnyei calls them “semi-structured interviews” (2007, p. 134), for this study is based up this form’s ability to be adapted for the required use. That is to say, that is it possible using this form of interview to have an underlying structure for the questions to be asked, while maintaining a certain level of freedom “since the format is open ended it not only provides for guidance and direction, but also allows for the interviewee to elaborate on certain issues” (ibid, p. 136).

3.1 The structure of the interviews

As mentioned, the interviews will be of the kind that Svedner and Johansson call “qualitative interviews” [translation our own] (2006, p. 42). Of these they say “qualitative interviews are the most important to know, because, together with observation, [they] are the primary method of obtaining the information usually looked for with the dissertation within teacher training” [translation our own] (ibid). They go on to say that interviews give information that makes it possible to understand teachers’ views on instruction, the placing of goals and planning. Therefore, the qualitative interview, when carried out correctly “gives knowledge that is directly usable in the teaching profession” (ibid). While Svedner and Johansson suggest the use of observation, due to the time constraints placed upon this paper, it will not be feasible to do so. To be able to do proper, meaningful observations on 4 classrooms will take more time than is available. Furthermore, as this is a study that focuses on the attitudes of teachers and their perceptions of what occurs in their teaching practice, rather than an examination of classroom practices, observations are not deemed necessary.

3.2 Strengths and weaknesses with the interview process

Dörnyei says of interviews “The interview is a natural and socially acceptable way of collecting information that most people feel comfortable with” (2007, p. 143). This means that since interviews are of high social profile even beginning researchers are likely to obtain
rich data in their interviews (ibid p. 143). As mentioned, the interview structure that will be used also allows for a certain amount of freedom for the interviewer.

However, it must be noted that not only are interviews time consuming to set up and conduct, they also require good communication skills on the part of the interviewer. Also, since the interview format does not allow for complete anonymity, there is a chance that the respondent will try to display themselves in better than light than might be the case, or exaggerate the more positive aspects of what they are saying while understating the negative aspects. Finally, other error margins such as shyness, difficulty to articulate or being too verbose could result in insufficient or useless data (ibid, p. 144).

Anonymity between teachers is also an area of concern. The four selected teachers in our study are from separate schools in the same city in the south of Sweden. We believe that this means the chances for contamination of our results through interviewee contact are reduced, as the interviewees are far less likely to have any form of contact with each other and are, therefore, less likely to be able to discuss their interviews with another interviewee.

A further problem that can occur with a study with only four interviewees is that of generalisations. It is because of this that no generalisations can be formed on the basis of this paper, although it may be possible to see certain trends in the interviewees' responses that would require further investigation at a later date.

3.3 Choice of interviewee and ethical questions

The interviewees for this study have been found by contact with skolkontoret in the city in which the study was to take place. It was hoped to find 4 teachers who actively practiced self-assessment with their students. A number of names were given to us, and letters inquiring if the teachers would like to participate in this study were sent to them (see appendix A). The letter described the purpose of the study, what was required of them, and that the participants would not be identifiable (Hatch, 2002, p. 51). We received 4 responses of a positive nature. So, in total there were 4 interviews conducted in order to collect relevant data for this research paper. The interviewees were, over and above what has already been mentioned, selected primarily on the basis that they are teachers of English that actively practice self-assessment.
in their classrooms. We feel that the data that we would have received from teachers that did not conduct self-assessment would have not been suitable for the purpose of this paper. In order to capture a wide, or as wide as possible in such a small study, gamut of experience, two of the teachers have considerably more experience than the remaining two (see section 4).

The interviewees were told that their identities will be held with the strictest of confidentiality. In order to comply with this the names given to the teachers in this paper and in the transcriptions are fictitious. Also, they were given the questions in advance, to enable both reflection upon them, and to be able to raise any objections to them. They were instructed that they, at any time, may pull out of the study.

The interviewees were told the purpose of this paper from the outset, and signed acceptance for the inclusion in this study was sought. Since the participants are the ultimate gatekeepers of information, good working relationships need to be established.

It should also be noted that the interviews were piloted before the actual interviews took place (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 75). A teacher that is related to one of us was the pilot subject.

3.4 Carrying out the interviews

The interviews were carried out individually, with both of us present. The tools used were laptop computer with a microphone and, as backup, a Dictaphone. The interviews were transcribed, and then copies of the transcription were given to the respective interviewees. This enabled them to make sure that we have understood what that have said, and allow for clarification if required.

The interviews themselves were conducted at the respective teacher’s school, either in one of the classrooms, or in a group room. We and the teacher being interviewed were the only people present in the room at the time of the interview. The interviews themselves were conducted in English and, later, the recordings were transcribed by us. The interviews took place on the following days: Gemma, 24/11/2009; Bob, 30/11/2009; Bill, 3/12/2009; Kim, 9/12/2009.
4. Results and analysis

The following section will present the results obtained from the interview conducted with the four teachers. The results from the interviews have been placed in to three categories, namely: Attitudes, benefits and difficulties. These categories are based upon the answers given by the interviewees in alignment to the wording of the interview questions.

Before continuing, we will briefly describe the teachers that took part in this study. First we have Gemma, a secondary school teacher with eight years of experience. Bob, our second teacher, is currently teaching at an upper secondary school where he has fifteen years of experience from teaching at various levels and age groups. Bill has fourteen years of experience at upper secondary level, while our final interviewee, Kim, has amassed seven years of experience at various upper secondary schools in the region.

4.1 Teachers’ Attitudes

As was shown in section 2.2, the attitude of the teacher in the classroom is of the utmost importance, he or she is the guide for the students in the classroom, and how he or she presents him or herself can reflect on the students’ own attitudes. Gemma brings up the aforementioned point when she says “…you have to be positive to do this if you are going to do it, otherwise it would just be crap you know”. She agrees with what Dewey wrote when she says “…we need to reflect, and I think that’s one of the best things”. She goes on to say “You have to be positive about it. You have to be willing to try”.

Dewey says that reflection is best done in interaction with others who have attitudes that value growth (Dewey 1897/1963, p. 143). Furthermore, Oscarsson (2009) found that the dialogue between teacher and student should be a positive one (p. 233). All four teachers that were interviewed had positive attitudes towards using self-assessment in the classroom.

Gemma here brings up a problem that she perceives in some teachers “…in school we have all types of different teachers, we have the kind of teachers that are really committed and really want to do a good job [and then], we have teachers that come here because they can go home early and they are not really interested in sort of trying new alternatives, or finding new ideas”, although to temper this attitude she adds “I think there are many teachers who do it
without knowing it”. This last sentence is a sentiment shared by all of those interviewed, and may highlight an intrinsic problem with the perceived ambiguity of the current education system in Sweden. This is something that we will come back to later in the paper.

Bob, like Gemma, is also very positive to the process of self-assessment, he even goes as far as to say “It’s kind of central to everything you do, or it should be”. It is clear from his responses that he feels that it should form a central part of classroom activities “I mean it’s [self-assessment] kind of central to the ethos of what we are supposed to be doing nowadays”. This statement shows Bob’s understanding of the paradigm shift, and the new ideology that permeates teaching today which was illustrated in section 1.4. Kim is also in agreement with Bob in regards of it being “more of an attitude towards all of the work you do”.

Bill, while positive, admits that he uses self-assessment in a more limited way, although he highlights what the others said when he says that he probably does it without knowing. He also thinks that it is one of the best ways that the students learn as he says he is of the opinion that the deeper the students can dig in to what he, or she, is doing, the more they will learn. This mirrors a similar thought from Bob where he said “They should be engaged and active, and getting to that level can be difficult, but once you’re up there […] it rolls”. Kim also agrees with Bill when she adds that she wants her students to take an active part in their learning in the way that they become “subjects not objects”.

All of the teachers interviewed, with the exception of Bob, felt that a lot of work is required in informing teachers about self-assessment. Bill, Kim and Gemma strongly suggest that more needs to be done. Bill reflects back to his time at teacher training school and replies that he was offered no formal education in the area of self-assessment. This is something that Gemma also found to be of concern “First of all there should be something in the education about this I don’t know how much there is now but when I got my education there was nothing”. Kim feels that there needs to be more discussion regarding self-assessment in school, and that the subject needs to be “more out there”. Bob on the other hand thinks that it is the teacher’s own responsibility to take part in courses that take place from time to time, and that “the information is out there, no doubt about it”. Bob also questions if it really is an individual choice to adopt self-assessment or not, even though the syllabus can be interpreted in many ways, because “it’s so central to the current way of working that it seems odd […] to reject it altogether”.

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The teachers were asked what they thought needed to be done in order to spread the word about self-assessment: they had slightly differing views. Gemma was of the opinion that the word should be spread at a local level from teacher to teacher “you could sort of spread the word to some colleagues and make them interested in this way”. Kim agrees with this although she sees the dialogue as happening at a more practical level “discuss with them [colleagues] how did things go? When you did this what did your students do? And what did you do then? Did it work?”. Bob thinks that because of the abundance of material and information available, the best way to go about spreading the word would be to package it together and market it in an attractive way. Furthermore, Bob points out the importance of making it clear to teachers how to use self-assessment, because if teachers can see the benefits they “are going to use it, but if they see it as a lot of theoretical, abstract nonsense, that has nothing to do with day to day life, well, they won’t”. Bill says that he feels that it is the Government’s responsibility to spread the word about self-assessment. He would like to see the syllabus clarified so that it becomes more understandable for both teachers and students alike. This is an area in which both Gemma and Kim strongly disagree with him. Kim says “sometimes it feels like what they’re [the Government] talking about doesn’t have that much to do with what actually goes on in my classroom, so, for me the further away the decisions are taken the less they have to do with my actual day to day”. Gemma expresses an even stronger sentiment when she says “If they [the Government], say that you have to do this thing about self-assessment then we will have to do it, but I don’t think many [teachers] would be happy about it”.

4.2 Interviewees’ perceived difficulties with self-assessment

In this section we will present the results from the interviews that touch upon the difficulties that the teachers perceive when conducting, or teaching, self-assessment.

A major problem that was encountered by all of the teachers interviewed was that of the difficulty for the students in understanding the criteria presented in the syllabus. For example Gemma says “They don’t understand the grading criteria from the curriculum so we always have to talk about it with them”. In order to minimize this problem, all of the teachers have developed strategies to simplify goals and criteria in order to allow for student understanding
of these goals. Gemma has to engage in dialogue “They have to help me so I can put it on the right level”. Bob also points to the vagueness of the national criteria for English, but points to the detailed information from the Common European Framework of Reference as a solution to this. Bill tells us that the lack of concrete criteria presents major hurdles to both students and teachers. He solves this problem by providing detailed matrices to his students, which concretise the specific goals for any given task. Kim thinks that there is a problem with the criteria as she says “the thing is since we have goal related grades today it’s really hard for the students to get a hang of what they are supposed to be doing, what it is that I want from them and most of the schools, what they do is break down the syllabus to a local syllabus. But we find it is not enough for our students”. She finds that she needs to break down the local criteria in order to make them understandable “So it’s not enough […] for me to sit and use all these big words. So I really need to break down, I break down into tasks, into items instead”.

Gemma mentions that she thinks it is difficult for students to embrace their roles as self-assessors, and that student apathy towards self-assessment, because of their not understanding the benefits, can be difficult to overcome. She states “some of them of course think it’s just school work, […] they just think you have to be here and make an effort, and […] they just do [their] school work and leave it behind”. Bob is somewhat in agreement as, in his experience, there is a resistance among some students, since it requires active participation “so people of the more lazier disposition will resist, because it’s more difficult than just sitting down and listening to me”. Also, he says that you can’t expect students to become self-assessors just by constantly handing out self-assessment sheets in an automated manner every week as they are going to get sick of it and “they’re going to switch off”. Bill also thinks that it is difficult for students who are not used to the practice of self-assessment “They’re not used to it, it’s a common thing that they have been used to seeing the teacher on one side, and seeing the students on the other side”. He also mentions that the students expect to get criticised by the teacher instead of understanding that teachers and students “are doing this together” and that they are responsible for their own achievements.

Gemma adds that student perceptions of where their level is at can cause problems in the beginning of teaching self-assessment, with some students having unrealistically high perceptions of their abilities, while some have unrealistically low ones, this is something that Kim highlights, when talking about self-assessment questionnaires, “They tend to cross I don’t know anything” due to low self-esteem. Gemma also brings up a point that Bob and Bill
found to be the case. They think that it is difficult for the students to know what level they are on. This is a problem because, as she remarks, “You have to know where you are, to know where to go”. Bob comments on this problem by suggesting that it is difficult for language students to know what to do and that, as a teacher, you need to specify different aspects of language to focus on over a period of time, something which Kim has also mentioned.

Two of the interviewees mentioned the lack of available time in order to first carry out self-assessment, and secondly follow up with meaningful feedback. Gemma says of this “They don’t get much [time to reflect] because they have so much to do in so little time”. Kim also finds that it is problematic that teachers do not have the time to discuss self-assessment, due to constant meetings instead of discussing problems in the classroom. Bob’s opinion is slightly different from that of Gemma and Kim. He remarks that there is plenty of time in order to teach students to be effective self-assessors “We have got thirteen years” he says. However, he also mentions the lack of time and resources in order to give personal feedback about achievements for each and every task that the students have done.

4.3 Interviewees’ perceived benefits

In the following section we shall present the benefits that the interviewees perceived with regards to self-assessment.

Gemma says that allowing the students to have documentation of their own progress, in the form of what she refers to as a “special test book”, where the students describe and explain how they understood a task and what they have learnt from it, enables her students, in dialogue with her, to visualize the students’ areas of strengths and weaknesses. Bob, through the use of self-assessment questionnaires and teacher feedback, also allows his students to find areas of importance. He also encourages his students to look back at previous work and pinpoint these areas for future reference. Bill too thinks that self-assessment is of great benefit to his students. He first asks them to peer-edit and looks at areas of lower performance, then self-assess and edit their work to bring it into line with the criteria for a given task. Kim is of the same opinion. She feels that the tools that she uses for self-assessment, matrices that clearly define the goals on a task specific basis, enable the students to reflect on their own work in relation to the goals, and therefore learn to become more independent learners. This,
together with a binder system, allows for the students to witness their own progression. Gemma is another teacher that uses matrices in order to clarify goals. She says that once they have concrete criteria in a matrix, it is easier because “we can say ok you are here now, and you need this to improve”. Bill is in agreement and says that the forming of the matrices leads to a greater understanding of where the students really are. The dialogue between the teacher and the student helps to clarify the students’ own positions to them. Kim, Gemma and Bill think that the clarification of goals and self-assessment practices ultimately breeds confidence in their students. Kim says that there are “never any questions in what they are supposed to do in order to get a grade” and “it strengthens their confidence”. Gemma expresses this by saying: knowing where you are and what you can do gives students more confidence. Bill adds that letting the students reflect is important since it strengthens the students’ confidence.

Kim and Bill think that the use of self assessment allows for their students to focus on what they can do instead of what they cannot do. Kim says the use of self-assessment questionnaires and a catalogue of previous work allow for the students to “focus on positive things”, as they are constantly reminded of what they have accomplished.

Gemma thinks that allowing for self-reflection “not only is a way of getting better at English, it’s also a way to learn, how to express your thoughts and that’s the aim in every subject”. Bob agrees as he says students studying English C should, by the end of this course, be able to “self-teach, self-identify needs and know where to go”. Kim remarks that self-assessing students become more independent. All of the teachers found, that in general, students’ perceptions of their own performance coincided with that of theirs the more experienced the students became in self-assessing. This point is clearly stated by Bob when he says of his students they “become frighteningly good at the end [of year three], and that’s the key because that means that they have internalised and reflected on the criteria”.
5. Discussion of teachers’ views on self-assessment

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of a number of teachers towards the practice of self-assessment. Three research questions were posed as a focus for this study. One question deals specifically with attitudes, another looks at the strategies and tools used by the teachers and the final question asks what the teachers feel needs to be done in order to aid the use of self-assessment in the classroom. In the following section we will, with these questions in mind, summarise and discuss the results presented in the preceding section. As has been previously mentioned the results obtained by this study can, in no way, be generalised to express the attitudes of all teachers.

It was found that the teachers that we interviewed were positive to the process of self-assessment. Both Bob and Kim feel that self-assessment needs to be seen as an integral part of teaching and that it is inseparable from the syllabus for English. Gemma also touches upon this point of view, as she feels that teachers need to be committed to trying new ideas, although she stops short of advocating self-assessment as a requirement. Bill uses self-assessment to a lesser degree than the other three teachers, although he does suggest that sometimes he uses it without recognizing the fact. This inconsistency can, according to the findings of Wigfield & Harold (1992), affect the students’ thoughts of themselves and their progress, as the implicit and explicit messages sent by the teacher regarding what they feel is important affects these aspects (cited in Oscarsson, 2009, p. 43). That is to say that if a teacher is inconsistent in using self-assessment the students may perceive this to mean it is not very important for their learning. This last comment perhaps raises the question of promotion of self-assessment, and the understanding of what it is. If there are, as our interviewees suggest, many teachers who are unaware of their using of self assessment, then we would suggest that more needs to be done about raising awareness of the process in the teaching profession, so its use becomes consistent, something that would benefit teachers and students alike.

It is clear from looking at the syllabi for English, and studying the new paradigms for teaching, that self-assessment is an important tool to use in the classroom. The course plan for English puts this clearly when it says, in the goals to strive for, “Develop their ability to reflect over and take responsibility for their own language learning and consciously use different ways of working to support their own learning” (National Agency for Education
This implies that self-assessment is indeed a requisite component in the modern language classroom. However, it appears that teachers have differing views on to what extent it should be employed. Bob, Gemma and Kim are all of the opinion that self-assessment leads to students being able to “self teach, self identify and know where to go” (Kim). Bob said that he felt that it led to the ultimate goal of the above quote from the National Agency for Education, namely, students who have no need for the teacher, in other words self-autonomous students, because they are able to internalize and reflect upon the criteria. This is, of course, one of the biggest benefits of self-assessment. If the students become sufficiently proficient at the process, they have the tools to achieve the goal of life-long learning. This implies that the students become aware of “where their formal language structures break down” (Oscarsson, 2009, p. 233).

It is also obvious from our results that the writings of Dewey can clearly be seen in the ideology of self-assessment. All of the teachers interviewed stressed the importance of allowing for student reflection, and allowing for the internalising of the learning process. This takes place both at an individual level and in cooperation with others, be it the teacher or other students. Here it is clear that constructivists’ ideas are also incorporated into the process. Furthermore, Oscarsson (2009) found that the dialogue between the teacher and the student should focus on the positive aspects of the work. This is something that both Gemma and Kim bring to the fore when they say that they try to focus on the positive, what the students can do, instead of the negative, what the student cannot do, this is in line with what Richards and Renandya (2002) say. They suggest that alternative forms of assessment allow for teachers to be able to focus on the positive aspects of student achievements. This way of thinking mirrors the finding of the National Agency for Education (2008) who found that in order to initiate this abstract thinking within students, teachers must pay heed to didactical problems concerning the analytical abilities of the students, that is to say focus must be placed on the positive aspects. Again, we can see a clear reference to the paradigm shift here, the move from a focus on product to a focus on process. This looking at the positive also has the effect of increasing student self confidence, which, as was shown in figure 1, is an important aspect of self-assessment.

Confidence is also built, According to Kim, Bill and Gemma through the clarifying of task goals. This was an area of major difficulty for all of the teachers asked. They all felt that the system was too vague and that it was difficult for teachers and students alike to interpret the
goals of the syllabus to a specific task. Lundahl (2009) says of this that there is an intrinsic difficulty in evaluating your own work. Therefore, the views and goals expressed in the syllabus have to be understood (p. 312). Here the teachers use different strategies in order to overcome this problem. Firstly the teachers involve the students in the interpreting of the goals, and from this dialogue produce a set of criteria. They do as Kim says “break down tasks, into items instead”. These are then often set out in a matrix, stating, in a language that is clear for the students, what is needed from them for any specific task. This is one of the steps that both Sadler (1989) and Rolheiser and Ross (n.d) mention is required in order to take the step to self-assessment. That is to say the students by being allowed to form the criteria are by in doing so, able to understand them. In doing this she is also avoiding the trap of students not understanding teacher goals as expressed by Oscarsson (2009).

The above leads into the finding that the interviewees were also of the opinion that self-assessment allows for the students to be more active in their learning “They should be […] active” (Bob). This, in itself, allows for the students to take a greater responsibility for their work and ultimately, as Richards and Renandya (2002) state, to regain ownership for the work they have done. This is an important step as this, regaining of ownership, allows for a greater active input from the students which means they can find out who they are, what they need to know and the benefits of the learning (p, 339), this in turn leads to the promotion of learner autonomy, something that is looked at in a positive light by us. Furthermore, Lundahl (2009) comments “One of the most important forces behind learning is that pupils feel that they are empowered” (p. 306).

The results we obtained also point to the fact that student attitude towards self-assessment is also an aspect that must not be overlooked. Bob and Gemma have shown that students sometimes find it difficult to embrace their new role, as self-assessor, as it requires a more active participation. Bob told us that it is not possible to expect students to become self-assessors solely by handing out self-assessment sheets. He warns that students will turn off if you follow this path. This could be because, as Bill says, most students are not used to assessing themselves, they are used to specific and unmovable teacher/student relationships, something that Bill thinks is a hinder to using self-assessment in his classes. In order to bypass these problems the teachers expressed the need to promote the benefits of self-assessment to their students. Bill, Bob and Gemma did add, however, that they noticed an improvement in the students’ ability to assess themselves over time, the students often started
out unsure about their levels and abilities, but by the end of their time at the respective schools, their ability to assess their achievements have vastly improved. Again, this is a result that backs up the previous research done by Von Elek (1985) and Ross (1998) who both found that student assessment accuracy increases with experience. This in turn means that the students as they gain experience rely less on teacher assessment because as Bob said “They become frighteningly good at it”. This is in line with findings of the study carried out for the Swedish National Evaluation of School Achievement (1998). Again, the use of self-assessment is shown to help students in becoming independent and life-long learners.

Another major problem expressed by our interviewees was that of the students’ perceptions of themselves. Gemma, Bill and Kim said that they found that students can have problems in knowing their current level and that those students with low self-esteem tend to underestimate their ability. In order to visualize the students’ areas of strengths and weaknesses Gemma lets the students document their own progress, she uses a portfolio system where the students can refer to their previous work and measure progress. As such she becomes a scaffold and as a consequence, as suggested by Black & Wiliam, aids the students in their meta-cognitive advancement (Gardner. Ed. 2006, p. 15). This is a strategy employed by Bob and Kim too, who have the students keep a back catalogue of work for future reference. This helps the students to, as Oscarsson (2009) says, “have a degree of self-awareness” (p. 36) Here we can see that the processes of understanding and learning are rooted in the Vygotskian idea of the Zone of Proximal Development, as the student knows what he, or she needs to do in order to progress, that is to say they may find their ZPD. We see that through the use of simple tools, such as portfolios, an arsenal of support and scaffolding is offered to the students in order aid the visualization of their own progress, to allow them to know where they stand at the moment and what they need to do to take the next step.

Another difficulty found by all of the teachers is that of available time. While the benefits of using self-assessment are evident to them, they all feel that the amount of time that they can commit to their classes is more limited. A common thread in the interviewees’ responses is that they have little time to offer feedback to the individual students. This can be a problem as according to Rolheiser and Ross (n.d), as the students need to have feedback on their evaluations as their own interpretation of how to apply these criteria are likely to be imperfect. Stefani (1998) found that students indeed want to have specific feedback linked to their performance and guidance on areas for improvement. This highlights that the lack of
time for such feedback is one area that needs to be addressed. The National Agency for Education also mentions the area of feedback where assessment leads to a more all-round feedback process (2008, p. 49). This also raises the problem that if self-assessment and consistent feedback are not implemented, a reduction of student influence may occur (ibid, p. 51). This is a difficult problem since the question of available time is always going to be an issue in schools. However, we feel that the tools are available for the classroom, for example portfolios, matrices and peer editing, some of which are in use by our interviewees. These tools can offer support to both the teacher and student, and reduce the amount of time required in giving feedback. We feel that it is important to allow for the time to offer the needed amount of support and feedback for the students, as there may, ultimately be a payback, where the students are able to become so proficient at the process that they can assess their positions themselves. Thus reducing the time required from the teacher.

As shown in our results three of the teachers, Bill, Gemma and Kim thought that more information was required in order to promote the use of self assessment. Bill and Gemma were critical of the teacher training that they received as no formal training was given in the field of self-assessment. Kim felt that there is not enough discussion in schools on the subject. Bob’s opinion differed from the aforementioned, as he feels that there is a large amount of information available for teachers. The concerns of Bill and Gemma have to an extent been answered, as there is now in the formal education of teachers’ instruction on self-assessment. Kim’s concern is more difficult to answer, although the provision of self-assessment seminars could be included in study days that crop up at school for the purpose of continued training for teachers. This would have to be organised at the school, or council level. Bob, while admitting to the breadth of available material, feels that this should be made more easily available and that the information should be packaged in such a way that the benefits of self-assessment are evident to all teachers. Gemma and Kim both expressed a perceived need for a discussion on the subject at a school level, between colleagues, in order to see a more widespread use of self-assessment in the classroom. They are both of the opinion that governmental intervention would cause problems within the profession, or not be relevant to their specific classrooms. Bill disagrees with them and thinks that the government needs to clarify the position on self-assessment in the curriculum, and, in order to aid the process, the goals of the syllabi. It is clear from the results that we got that some kind of clarification of the goals of the syllabi is required. All of the teachers expressed the problem that they had in trying to extrapolate concrete goals from the, in their words, vague criteria. This obviously
has a great impact on how efficiently they can conduct self-assessment as the criteria have to be explained and as Rolheiser and Ross say modeled and exemplified (n.d, para. 16). This process takes time, and as has been shown the teachers feel that that is at a premium. Clarification of the goals would allow for more time to provide feedback, an important part of the self-assessment process, and reduce student difficulty in knowing where they stand in relation to the set goals. Hopefully this problem will be greatly reduced when the new syllabi are scheduled to be introduced in 2011.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to study the attitudes, both the difficulties they perceive and the benefits, of a number of teachers regarding self-assessment. Also we wanted to find out the tools and strategies used in its implementation, together with what the teachers thought was required to promote the use of self-assessment in other classrooms.

We have found that the teachers are positive to the use of self-assessment, but that the process brings with it a number of difficulties. There is a perceived vagueness of the syllabi for English together with the vague wording of the curriculum, the difficulty of convincing students that the process is worthwhile, the difficulty of teaching the process and the difficulty of the restricted amount of time available. We also found that the teachers imply that there needs to be an ongoing discussion around the subject of self assessment, and even governmental intervention and clarification, not only to allow for a smoother integration of the approach in the classroom, but also to spread the word about it.

We also found that the teachers use a number of tools and strategies to aid in the implementation of self-assessment, these include feedback to students, the selling of self-assessment principles and benefits to the students, the clarifying of specific task goals, goal matrices for the use of the student and documentation. The latter takes the form of portfolios of work and booklets, or the use of self-evaluation questionnaires. They are also of the opinion that the use of these tools clarifies, for the students, areas where progress can be made, while acknowledging that these tools must be monitored in order to reduce the effect of student beliefs.
The benefits that the teachers expressed are of great importance. We found that they think the process of the students assessing themselves allows the students to reach the goal of life-long learning, and to become independent learners. This includes a greater knowledge of not only why they are learning things, but how they are learning things in relation to a given criteria. Also, it empowers the students enabling them to become an active participant in their own learning. It also highlights to students where they are and where they need to go. The teachers also thought that it acted as a catalyst, strengthening student confidence. Furthermore, they felt that it aided in the concurrence of student and teacher opinions regarding the assessment of student work.

We are fully aware that many factors must be taken into account in order for the students to see their own progress, and to understand the benefits of self-assessment. One is the fact that teaching practices must be amended in order for self-assessment to work. As Bob said, “you cannot just hand out questionnaires and expect students to become expert self-assessors”. The process requires a level of commitment from the teacher and students alike in order for the process to function at a satisfactory level.

We also received results that seemed to coincide with the result found from other studies in the area of self-assessment although, as we have already mentioned, because of the size of this study, we feel that we are not in a position to offer any generalisations.

It is in light of our findings we would like to suggest that further research, conducted with teachers who say that they do not practice self-assessment, takes place. This would give an insight into whether they do, or do not, conduct self-assessment. This was a point that was brought up by the interviewees in this study. Also, it would give an insight into the barriers that they feel are hindering them from actively using self-assessment in their classrooms as well as their general attitudes towards the subject.
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Primary sources

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Bill, December 3, 2009. Interview
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Appendix A

Interview questions.

1. How do you allow for the students to reflect over their own work?
2. What are your reasons for using, or not using, self assessment in your classroom?
3. Could you tell us what materials you use for student self assessment?
4. How, in your experience, has your allowing for this self reflection helped your students?
5. What role do you as a teacher play in student self assessment? That is to say is there a dialogue between you and your students?
6. Have you found there to be any difficulties in teaching the students to assess themselves?
7. What do you feel are the advantages/disadvantages in using self assessment in your classroom?
8. Are your students’ perceptions of their achievements and learning similar to yours?
9. In your experience are teachers given enough information about how to promote self assessment in the classroom?
10. If not, what sort of support would you like?
11. What do you feel needs to be done to ‘spread the word’ about self assessment?
12. Is there anything else you feel is relevant that we have not asked?
Appendix B

Informant letter

Hej,


Vi garanterar att allt material kommer att förvaras på ett sådant sätt att obehöriga ej kan få tillgång till det och att det endast används för vårt examensarbete. Det slutgiltiga arbetet kommer att vara helt avidentifierat så att varken personer eller miljön kan känns igen.

Hälsningar

Lovrenc Zitko & Andrew Westlake