Alternative Assessments and EFL Learner Autonomy

Nava Nourdad

University of Tabriz

nourdad@tabrizu.ac.ir

Abstract

Alternative assessments have evolved from an epistemological change in education. They see assessment and instruction as two sides on the same coin which go hand in hand. The traditional roles of both teachers and learners are, consequently, modified which is essential for better language development. In this line, the present study aimed at comparing the effects of portfolio and journal writing assessment on EFL learners' autonomy. The study followed a quasi-experimental design with two study groups having a pre-test, treatment, post-test format. To this end, 39 EFL learners whose scores on PET test were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected for the groups which were then randomly assigned for two treatment types, namely portfolio assessment (PA) and journal writing assessment (JWA). The groups' autonomy levels were compared by one-way ANCOVA, the results of which did not reveal any significant difference in the positive effects of these two common alternative assessments. It was inferred that language teachers can take the advantage of any or both of these alternative assessment types to improve their learners' autonomy and make them lifelong language learners. The great role of autonomy in language learning and further pedagogical implications for the findings for language learners, teachers, and curriculum developers are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Alternative Assessment, Portfolio Assessment, Journal Assessment

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy refers to a student's ability to set appropriate learning goals and take charge of his or her own learning. Autonomous learners are characterized by their active involvement in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their learning. Autonomy makes the learners control and manage their own learning (Benson, 2001). One of the aims of pedagogy and education is to make autonomous learners.One key principle of learner autonomy is the emphasis on the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher (Finch, 2002). In autonomous language classrooms, teachers are changing their roles and moving to new ones. Language teachers do not play the role of transmitters of information. Their role is more that of a counselor and a facilitator whose position is to manage the activities in the classroom and maintain learning environment that encourage learners to view learning as a lifelong process (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001; Lowes & Target, 1999).The learners' role is to take charge of their learning (Holec, 1981). As Dam (1995) emphasizes, learners' active participation and responsibility for their own learning process are significant in the field of foreign language learning. Hence, the learner's role in an autonomous learning is not that of a passive receiver of knowledge. Learners become autonomous by being involved in all aspects of the learning process and they need to have some choice and control over their own learning (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003). Even though the teacher remains the more knowledgeable and experienced person in the classroom, learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute.

It should be added that success in autonomy- oriented pedagogy depends on the operationalization of three interacting concepts: learner involvement, learner reflection, and target language use (Little, 2007). The principle of learner involvement entails that we help learners to take charge of their own

learning by engaging them fully in planning, monitoring and evaluation. The principle of learner reflection, already implied by the principle of learner involvement, entails that we help learners to engage reflectively with the process and content of their learning. The principle of target language use entails that we help learners to use the target language as the medium of task performance but also of metacognition and metalinguistic reflection (Benson, 2007). These three principles take account of the affective, metacognitive/metalinguistic and communicative dimensions of language learning.

Providing these three interrelated principles seems to be possible through post-method language teaching and consequently alternative assessments rather than summative assessments. In these types of assessment, the focus has changed from standard tests view of the assessment toward integration of assessment with learning.

The lack of autonomy among Iranian EFL learners is a great problem which hinders language learning. In Iranian educational system, which is still teacher-centered learners are not given the responsibility of their own development and the same dependence moves to foreign language setting. Teacher-centered classroom is characterized by transmitting the knowledge from the expert, who is the teacher, to the novice, who is the learner (Harden & Crosby, 2000). But what may have a contribution to autonomy and autonomous learning results mainly in learner-centered environment. Learner-centered classroom is described as an environment in which learners are active in the processes of learning (Nunan, 2003).

Recent teaching and assessment methods focus not only on language development, but also on developing whole person learners. Learner autonomy is currently one of the most widely discussed concepts in foreign language

pedagogy and a common goal of second language curricula. It is generally accepted that reflection is a key constituent of learner autonomy.

Considering that reflection has effect on autonomy of the learners, and considering the potentiality for providing reflection through alternative assessment, this study compared the effect of two commonly used alternative assessments namely portfolio and journal assessment on learner autonomy among Iranian EFL learners. Based on the research problem and the purpose of the study, the following research question was issued:

> *Do portfolio assessment and journal assessment differ in their effect on EFL learners' autonomy?*

In line with the previous literature and the research question, the null hypothesis of the study was as follows:

> *There is no significant difference in effects of portfolio and journal assessment on EFL learners' autonomy.*

2. Methodology

2.1. Design of the Study

The present study was done in order to compare the potential effects of portfolio assessment and journal assessment on autonomy of EFL learners. Therefore there were two independent variables as portfolio and journal assessments and one dependent variable as EFL learners' autonomy. Considering non-random convenient sampling, the design of the study was a quasi- experimental with a pre-test, treatment and a post-test in two experimental groups.

2.3. Participants of the Study

The participants of the present study included 39 adult male and female Iranian EFL learners. They were selected through convenience sampling from four classes of a language institute. The initial number was 44, however 39 homogenous learners whose language proficiency test scores laid between one standard deviation above and below the mean score were selected for the study.The participants hold different educational degrees in various majors.

2.4. Data Gathering Instruments

Preliminary English Test (PET) was used as English proficiency test to homogenize the selected participants. The selected test included reading and listening parts. The total score of the mentioned test was 60; from which 35 was dedicated to reading skill including reading comprehension and vocabulary questions and 25 to listening skills.

In order to measure learners' autonomy before and after the treatment period, Macaskill and Taylor's (2010) Autonomous Learning Scale was used. It is a 12-item measure with two subscales measuring independence of learning. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale including scales, 1 (very unlike to me), 2 (unlike to me), 3 (neither like nor unlike to me), 4 (like to me), and 5 (very like to me) with higher scores indicating higher levels of autonomous learning. This instrument was administrated in a pilot study before administration on the study participants in order to find out about its reliability. The calculated reliability by Cronbach's alpha appeared to be 0.83 which was quiet acceptable.

2.5. Procedure

The procedures of the present study include, selection of participants, pre-testing the participants, treatment period, and post-testing of the participants. Each procedure is explained separately as follows:

As the first step of the study, by selecting the learners in a language institute and through implementing PET language proficiency test, 39 pre-intermediate EFL learners were selected out of 44 learners of Jahad Daneshgahi institute. The scores from the PET test were analyzed and the learners whose score were between the range of +1 and -1 standard deviation, were selected as final participants of study (n=39). By the beginning of the next term, those learners were randomly placed in two classes (groups) namely portfolio and journal. Therefore 20 of the selected learners were randomly assigned to portfolio group and 19 to journal group.

After randomly assigning learners into groups of portfolio and journal, the participants' prior autonomy level was measured by Macaskill and Taylor's (2010) Autonomous Learning Scale.After the pre-test, treatment period began. In portfolio group "classroom model of portfolio" was applied during 10 sessions to the participants and the portfolio procedure consisted of collection, selection, and reflection. At the beginning of the term, the instructor explained about the design, goal, and procedure of the portfolio assessment.The participants were given reading texts and were asked to summarize them during which there was interaction between teacher and students. Teacher's role was as a facilitator. There are some essential elements in a portfolio such as a cover letter, table of contents, core and optional entries, dates, drafts and reflection sheets. Since this study considered a reading portfolio, two of these activities (reflection sheets and cover letter) were considered in the study.

A Cover letter is an essential part of the portfolio. It consists of two parts. The first part gives information about the author of the portfolio; a kind of autobiography. The second part is similar to reflection. There, participants were supposed to evaluate themselves as a whole: how they performed during the process, what they gained from the process, and what kind of changes, if any, they underwent.

Reflection Sheets are the key elements of portfolios. Through the reflection sheets, after each task, participants gained insight into their own work. They reflect on how they performed the task, why they chose the text, and what they have learned. Therefore, in Portfolio group, the participants read about different topics based on teachers' instruction. After that, the instructor wrote his notes and comments. By means of these comments, learners noticed strong and weak points of their reading comprehensionability. Then, the learners were asked to reflect on or self-assess their work and evaluate it. Then, they revised and redrafted their task upon their instructor's feedbacks and their own reflections.

The participants in the journal writing group read the same texts as the portfolio group did during 10 sessions and they summarized them based on the teachers' instructions and reviewed them critically. Journal writing can have many different applications based on the goals of the instructor and learners. One common model of journal writing is used to promote reflection and thought through one-on-one dialogue between the student and instructor, this model is called dialogue journal. According to the aims of present study, this model, dialogue journal, was applied for journal group.

Giving the reading comprehension text, the instructor asked the participants to summarize the text and write their reflections on the reading text. Each session, the instructor randomly selected a few students to share

what they have written in their journals. Then the instructor collected journals at the end of each day or week and responded to anything the participants had written.

Summarizing was the reading comprehension strategy of the present study, i.e. the learners were supposed to read the passages and summarize them. The instructor taught them summarizing strategy. The learners in the portfolio group summarized the passages and then reflected on or self-assessed their work and evaluated it. The learners in the journal group, on the other hand, read the same passages and summarized them and after summarizing reviewed them critically and gave their ideas and comments about them. After the 10-session treatment of the two groups, their autonomy was measured once more to compare the effect of the two assessment types.

3. Results

Prior to the treatment the homogeneity of the participants in autonomy was also investigated through the normality tests, the results of which are presented in Table 1. As it is shown in Table 1, distribution of the data in both groups was normal since the Skewness and Kurtosis were in normal distribution range (±2).

Table 1. *Normality Test of Pre Treatment Autonomy*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
PA Group	20	22	48	.67	.51	.54	.99
JWA Group	19	20	47	.17	.52	-.39	1.01

The homogeneity of the participants in post treatment autonomy was also investigated through the normality tests, the results of which are presented in

Table 2. The results indicated that the distribution of scores in both groups (PA and JWA) was normal.

Table 2. *Normality Test of Post Treatment Autonomy*

	N	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Skewness Statistic	Skewness Std. Error	Kurtosis Statistic	Kurtosis Std. Error
PA group	20	25	49	.24	.51	.01	.99
JWA group	19	20	48	-.01	.52	-.48	1.01

In order to answer the research question comparing the effect of portfolio assessment and journal writing assessment on EFL learner autonomy, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The independent variable, assessment type, included two levels: portfolio assessment and journal writing assessment. The dependent variable was the participants' scores in post treatment autonomy questionnaire and the covariate was the participants' scores in pretreatment autonomy questionnaire.

Table 3. *Analysis of Co-Variance for Autonomy by Assessment Type*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Powerb
Corrected Model	1561.2a	3	520.4	135.5	.00	.921	406.673	1.000
Intercept	11.0	1	11.0	2.8	.09	.076	2.874	.378
PT Autonomy	1514.4	1	1514.4	394.4	.00	.919	394.495	1.000
Groups	9.8	1	9.8	2.5	.11	.069	2.575	.345
Groups* PT Autonomy	5.5	1	5.5	1.4	.23	.040	1.456	.217
Error	134.3	35	3.8					
Total	51023.0	39						
Corrected Total	1695.5	38						

a. R Squared=.92 (Adjusted R Squared=.91)

b. Computed using alpha=.05

A preliminary analysis evaluating the homogeneity-of-regression (slopes) assumption indicated that the relationship between the covariate and the dependent variable did not differ significantly as a function of the independent variable, $F(1,35)=1.45$, $p=.23$. That is, $p(.23) > (.05)$. The ANCOVA was not significant, $F(1, 35)=2.57$, $p=.11$, $p> .05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis indicating that "there is no significant difference in effects of portfolio and journal assessment on EFL learners' autonomy" was approved and it was inferred that portfolio and journal assessments were equally influential in increasing EFL learners' autonomy.

4. Discussion

The present study was done in order to compare the effects of portfolio assessment and journal assessment on learner autonomy of EFL learners. It was found that there is no significant difference in effects of portfolio and journal assessment on EFL learners' autonomy. These two major types of alternative assessment were almost equally beneficial in making learners autonomous in language learning. Considering the vast scope of language learning, teachers cannot convey the whole knowledge on language to the learners. At the end of the instruction there is much left to be acquired. Autonomy, therefore, plays a great role in developing lifelong skills in learners. The findings presented the equal benefits of portfolio assessment and journal writing assessment. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) indicated that a key element of portfolios is student self-assessment; without self-assessment and reflection on the part of the student, a portfolio is not a portfolio. According to these researchers, the self-assessment called for by portfolios can have several outcomes for the student: students take responsibility for knowing where they

are with regard to learning goals; students broaden their view of what is being learned.

Portfolio provides the situation for reflection. Reflection is an important element in autonomy. Portfolio fosters intrinsic motivation, responsibility, and ownership, promote student-teacher interaction with teacher as facilitator, individualizes learning and celebrate the uniqueness of each student, provides tangible evidence of a student's work, facilitates critical thinking self-assessment, and revision process, offers opportunities for collaborative work with peers, and permits assessment of multiple dimensions of language learning (Brown, 2004, p. 257).

Another alternative assessment of the present study, journal writing assessment, was also reported as an equally effective means of improving learner autonomy. Assessment can be viewed through many different lenses: as a form of self-expression, as a record of events or as a form of therapy. It can be a combination of these and other purposes (Boud, 2001) and this combination is the potential feature of alternative assessment like journal writing. Journal writing assessment is a technique which has the potential to promote critical self-reflection where dilemmas, contradictions, and evolving worldviews are questioned or challenged.

Journal writing assessment in this study included summary writing and dialog between instructor and learner. Progoff (1975) even suggests having simulated conversations with the inner self or real conversations with others, including obtaining feedback, as a means of furthering any value received from the process. Journals enable learners to record aspects of what they are reading in their own voice or words (Perham, 1992). When learners notice their learning process and they assess their own learning and answer their self-raised

questions rather than just answering the to-be-answered questions of the material, their autonomy

Deepening the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking or developing a questioning attitude, enabling learners to understand their own learning process, increasing active involvement in learning and personal ownership of learning, enhancing professional practice or the professional self in practice, enhancing the personal valuing of the self towards self-empowerment, enhancing creativity by making better use of intuitive understanding, providing an alternative 'voice' for those not good at expressing themselves, fostering reflective and creative interaction in a group learning is inherent in any process of expression, that is, in any way of giving form to the world as experienced are among the benefits of journal writing assessment (Moon,1999, pp.188-194).

No study, to the best knowledge of the researcher, had compared two types of alternative assessment with each other; however, this study did this comparison and it found that portfolio assessment and journal writing assessment do not differ in their effects on autonomy and regardless of their positive effect they do not have differential effects from each other. Both methods highlighted the reflection and responsibility among the learners and both lead to the positive effect on autonomy.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on two major alternative assessment types namely journal writing assessment and portfolio assessment. While the previous literature reflected the effectiveness of alternative assessments in educational context, this study specifically focused on comparing the effect of these two alternative assessment on learner autonomy.

Through this study the research observed that for many students, the process of maintaining a journal helps them become more organized and focused on the areas they are studying. There is often personal clarification that takes place in journal writing in which the learners reach certainty after several efforts and their comprehension of the reading text becomes more completed by after every revision, too, as the journaling process helps in the elucidation of opinions, beliefs, and feelings.

Portfolio writing assessment gains its power from the existing relationship between learners and instructors and the learners' reflection as well. The learners' participation in the given tasks is very different from conventional classes, and learners are aware of this change, for the beginning sessions they are not very sure of the purpose of this method but by practicing more and more, they realize their own responsibility and power in their own learning.

The results of the study reflected that both portfolio assessment and journal writing assessment have potential in improving learner autonomy. Among the other advantages of these two alternative assessment types aredeveloping a questioning attitude in order to answer their own questions while reading comprehension in order to fill the gap in their own understanding of the text, enabling them to notice their own learning process and observe their progress in understanding and comprehension, increasing active involvement in learning in contrast to conventional methods of presenting reading comprehension, improving the instructors' understanding of individual differences, raising reflection and interaction in a learning environment. However, without any doubt these methods are really hard to apply in large classes and it needs a lot of patience and skill of the instructor.

References

Benson, P. (2001). Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education.

Benson, P. (Ed.). (2007). Learner Autonomy: Teacher and learner perspectives. Dublin: Authentik.

Boud, D. (2001). Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. In English, L. M. & Gillen, M. A. (Eds.) Promoting Journal Writing in Adult Education. New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education No. 90. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 9-18.

Dam, L. (1995). Learner Autonomy 3: From Theory to Classroom Practice. (D. Little, Ed.) Dublin: Authentic Language Learning Resources Ltd.

Finch, A. (2002). Autonomy: Where are we? Where are we going? JALT CUE-SIG Proceedings. (pp. 15-2). Retrieved February 14, 2017, from http://www .finchpark.com /arts/autonomy /index. htm.

Holec, H. (1981). Autonomy and foreign language learning. Oxford: Pergamon. First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Jacobs, G. M., & Farrell, T. S. (2001). Paradigm Shift: Understanding and Implementing Change in Second Language Education. Retrieved June 4, 2017, from TESL - EJ: Teaching English as a second or foreign language.

Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching 1*(1), 14-29.

Little, D., Ridley, J., & Ushioda, E. (Eds.). (2003). Learner autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom: Teacher, learner, curriculum and assessment. Dublin: Authentik.

Moon, J. (1999). Reflection in Learning and Professional Development. London: Kogan Page.

O'Malley, J. & Chamot, A. (1990). Learning strategies in second language acquisition. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Perham, A. J. (1992). *Collaborative Journals*. Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference. Louisville, KY. USA. Retrieved February 3, 2017, from ERIC database.

Progoff, I. (1975). At a Journal Workshop. New York: Dialogue House Library.