

# THE ROLE OF PEER ASSESSMENT IN DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT LEARNERS' AUTONOMY

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**Abstract.** The aim of language education is no longer limited to developing learners' linguistic skills only. In order to promote language learning as a life-long process, a growing impact in the language classroom is placed on non-linguistic aspects, such as motivation or learner autonomy. The latter can be fostered in the classroom by means of alternative assessment methods, such as portfolio, project, observation and peer assessment. This article provides an account of a quasi-experiment conducted in the first and second year of lower secondary school in Poland in order to investigate whether and to what extent the application of peer assessment affects the level of autonomy in adolescent learners aged 13-14. The study is based on mixed methods research comprising both quantitative and qualitative data elicitation tools such as a questionnaire, classroom observation and interviews. The applied methodology helped to discover that although the overall level of autonomy did not change as the result of the treatment, a number of autonomous behaviours emerged. It can be concluded that peer assessment does not suffice to foster autonomy in adolescent learners; still, it might appear as a useful element of a wide-ranging teaching scheme aiming at involving learners in the teaching and learning processes.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, alternative assessment, peer assessment, adolescent learners

## INTRODUCTION

Fostering learner autonomy has become one of the key elements of foreign language learning and teaching stipulated by the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001). This document has an important impact on the national core curriculum for language learning introduced in Poland in 2009. Apart from developing learners' competence in respect to language skills, teachers need to promote autonomous behaviours and instil in learners the sense of responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy can be fostered by means of diverse classroom procedures such as encouraging self-reflection, introducing collaborative tasks or implementing diverse forms of assessment. Assessment is an important element of classroom procedure as it both serves as feedback on learners' performance and provides insights into the effectiveness of the teaching practice.

The aim of the quasi-experiment implemented in this study was to determine whether peer assessment applied in a lower secondary school (learners aged 13-14) exerts any effect on adolescents' level of autonomy in the period of one year. The researcher focused on the overall level of autonomy as well as its seven components selected for the purposes of this study: selection and implementation of relevant resources, collaboration with other members of the group, the ability to establish learning aims and objectives, engagement in outside classroom learning, learners' ability to evaluate their own learning process, implementation of appropriate learning strategies and the subjects' attitudes toward the teachers and their role in education. Moreover, the application of mixed methods research instruments helped to gain valuable descriptive insight into the language classroom and demonstrate how the new assessment method was implemented in practice.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The emergence of cognitive and constructivist psychology and the focus on the holistic growth of a person caused a shift from knowledge-based to experience-based and learner-centred approaches in education. These changes necessitated modification of instructional goals so that they would aim to 'facilitate the learner to become a more skilled, independent and responsible person through a better understanding of the process and of himself' (Kohonen, 1999: 280). One of the tools that could be used to promote the holistic development of the learners is assessment since it not only serves as feedback on the learners' success or failure in the learning process, but also provides valuable insight into the effectiveness of the teaching practice by indicating the areas that need further development and improvement.

In recent years a shift from the *culture of testing* to the *culture of assessment* can be observed (Birenbaum and Dochy, 1996; Fox, 2008). The testing culture is rooted in the structuralist view of language and psychometric methods of measurement and by focusing on obtaining quantitative results of learners' achievement and proficiency, tests achieve high objectivity and reliability of measurement. They fail, however, to take into account the process of learning and the uniqueness of individual language performance.

The assessment culture brings about solutions to these problems as it emphasises:

- (1) the centrality of the classroom (teaching practice and learning process);
- (2) the active role played by students/learners in assessment processes including standard setting, identification of evaluation criteria, procedures, etc.;
- (3) a heightened valuing of process; and
- (4) outcomes characterized by summaries of learner competencies which are detailed, descriptive and informative, rather than a single, quantifiable score. (Fox, 2008: 102)

Being an alternative to the traditional assessment, the new approach underlines the process, as opposed to solely the product, of learning and the importance of integrating assessment with the instruction. Paper-and-pencil tests are replaced with meaningful, authentic and communicative assessment tasks, smoothly incorporated into the ongoing classroom practice. The learners' results, rather than being limited to a numeric grade, provide meaningful feedback and promote learning (Brown and Hudson, 1998).

One of such alternative methods is peer assessment (also termed as *collaborative assessment*) which refers to a situation in which learners make judgements about each other's performance according to a set of established criteria. Learners individually, in pairs or in groups assess, for instance, their peers' homework or different in-class tasks. The opinions may be presented on a rating scale, in the form of oral or written comments, questionnaires, journals, etc. Peer assessment is often considered as a prerequisite for self-assessment as it helps the learners to become acquainted with assessment criteria and provides guidance on how to use them in reference to a particular performance (Black, et al. 2003; Little, 2003). Similarly to self-assessment, the introduction of assessment by peers requires a gradual progression through a number of steps. First of all, the crucial elements of performance and the hierarchy of correctness are negotiated, and possible forms of feedback connected with the learning goals are specified. Learners need to be accustomed to being corrected by others if peer assessment is to become an integral part of learning. Although teacher and peer assessment of the same performance often yield different results, it must be remembered that the two forms of assessment also have a different function in the classroom and that peer assessment is more valued for providing a formative contribution than for a numeric evaluation of the performance (Cheng and Warren, 2005).

Aware that their work would be later checked by their peers, learners engaged in peer assessment are motivated to work more carefully while doing homework or classwork tasks because they are more inclined to accept criticism from other learners rather than from the teachers; they take such comments more seriously and try harder to improve their future performance (Black, et al. 2003). Involvement in peer assessment makes the learners more sensitive to linguistic accuracy which leads to a greater self-control of their own language production (Wilczyńska, 1999). Moreover, by engaging in reasoning, monitoring and decision-making in the peer assessment process, the learners develop higher thinking skills (Cheng and Warren, 2005). As learners differ in terms of their linguistic abilities, in the course of peer assessment they can exchange information and complement each other's competence. If peer assessment is performed against certain standardised criteria, it can be useful in preparing the learners for external assessment as the learners develop awareness about the criteria and the format of the formal examination (Little and Perclová, 2001). As another advantage may be considered the learners feeling of being empowered to contribute to diverse classroom initiatives and believing that their involvement is important (Wilczyńska, 1999). If conducted in a foreign language, peer

assessment promotes natural use of language in the classroom. While correcting each other's work, learners are engaged in meaningful discussions and exchange of information. Consequently, by being seamlessly incorporated into the collaborative classroom practice, peer assessment plays also a socializing function and develops interpersonal skills (Cheng and Warren, 2005). Due to the fact that peer assessment promotes real communication and focuses on the learning process, learners are more likely to engage in self-reflection and discuss their needs and problems with their peers and the teacher, which gives the latter an insight into the learners' learning process. Finally, when the learners are engaged in peer assessment, the teacher has more time to reflect on the class work and is able to work individually with specific learners (Black et al., 2003).

The alternative assessment (peer assessment included) necessitates reformulation of classroom practice and redefinition of teacher's and learner's roles. Learners need to become active participants in the assessment process who share responsibility in the classroom, reflect on their own learning and assessment as well as collaborate with the teacher and peers. This new approach to assessment aims at developing motivated and self-regulated learners who are able to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Due to these properties, alternative assessment is claimed to have a positive impact on the development of autonomy (Birenbaum and Dochy, 1996; Fox, 2008; Shohamy, 1996), i.e. 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981: 3). This responsibility needs to be present at all stages of the learning process: from goal setting and ongoing management to the evaluation of the learning outcomes. By encouraging learners to apply diverse assessment criteria, focus on and discuss the quality of their peers' work and reflect on their peers' and their own work, peer assessment is likely to contribute to the development of autonomous behaviours in a language classroom.

In Poland the new curriculum for language learning implemented in 2009 assumes that the general aim of education on the lower secondary level is to develop learners' intellectual independence to enable them to make educational choices that would be compatible with their capabilities and personal interests. In order to meet these objectives, schools should create optimal conditions helping the learners to acquire and retain knowledge, develop the ability of observation and reflectiveness and, finally, encourage the learners to seek opportunities for self-education. Learners attending lower secondary school undergo a transition from childhood to adulthood; therefore, the development of autonomous learning and the ability to take responsibilities for their own decisions seem vitally important in the process of holistic development of an individual.

## METHODS

The research aimed to determine whether the applied assessment method affects the level of learner autonomy over the period of one school year. The instruments

developed for the purposes of the research helped to observe the changes in the overall level of autonomy as well as the emergence of autonomous behaviours in the following areas:

- Subscale 1, *selection and implementation of relevant resources*, refers to the subjects' use of additional learning materials, in particular the types of resources, the reasons for and the frequency of use and the role of the teacher or parents in the selection process.
- Subscale 2, *collaboration with other members of the group*, is devoted to the subjects' attitudes to cooperation and the quality of collaborative work in the classroom. It also aims at determining to what extent the subjects feel individual responsibility for the outcome of pair- or group-work.
- Subscale 3, *the ability to establish learning aims and objectives*, focuses on planning of the learning process. The research instruments aim at collecting data about the learners' goals as well as the decisions the subjects make in order to achieve the learning objectives. Another important issue is the reason for learning the language – whether the subjects study because of the grades or because they perceive the intrinsic value of learning English.
- Subscale 4, *engagement in outside classroom learning*, refers to the subject's eagerness to participate in extracurricular initiatives connected with language learning as well as their engagement in the learning process in self-study situations.
- Subscale 5, *learners' ability to evaluate their own learning process*, aims at eliciting information if the learners are able to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses in the language learning process. This subscale also focuses on the subjects' interest in the feedback received from the teacher as well as their engagement in self-assessment.
- Subscale 6, *implementation of appropriate learning strategies*, places emphasis on the subjects' ability to apply effective strategies in their learning, e.g. while memorising vocabulary and practising grammar. It is also important to know the source (e.g. teachers, parents, peers) of the strategies used by the learners.
- Subscale 7, *attitudes toward the teachers and their role in education*, concerns the subjects' attitudes towards their language teachers and their role in the learning process. The focal point in this subscale is the learners' perception of division of responsibility in the language classroom.

As the use of different research methods ensures validity of research results and helps to overcome the weaknesses and biases which may arise when only one method is applied, mixed methods research was adopted. Quantitative data concerning autonomy was obtained by means of a pre- and post-questionnaire (Czura, 2010) prepared on the basis of descriptions of autonomous behaviour (Boud, 1988; Legutke and Thomas, 1991; Dickinson, 1992; Breen and Mann,

1997; Sheerin, 1997) and acknowledged autonomy questionnaires used in the Polish educational context (Michońska-Stadnik, 2000; Pawlak, 2004). The answers were graded according to a Likert-type scale where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 – 'strongly agree.' The questionnaire was administered in Polish. Additionally, in order to collect qualitative information, the researcher observed the groups once a month in a variety of classroom situations: language instruction, practice, production as well as assessment-related procedures. Finally, towards the end of the research, randomly selected subjects from each group were interviewed. The researcher's pre-determined observation sheet and interview questions corresponded closely with the seven subscales focused on in the questionnaire (Czura, 2010).

## 1 SUBJECTS

A research to be called *an experiment* needs to fulfil two conditions: '(1) there must be experimental and control groups, i.e. groups distinguished by which treatment they have experienced, and (2) subjects must be randomly assigned to one of these groups' (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991: 19). The research presented in this article does not meet one of these conditions as the subjects were not selected at random and the division into experimental groups was based on the already formed class units in the school. The research fulfils the first condition, i.e. there is one experimental and one control group exposed to a treatment; therefore, the study can be referred to as a quasi-experiment. Due to administrative reasons, such as the size of the school in which the research took place, the working time of the teachers and the timetable, the researcher needed to comply with the existing group division and form two research groups taught by two different teachers. Each research group consisted of 22 first- and second-year subjects aged 13-14. Every attempt, however, was made to ensure comparability of the research groups: all students followed the same syllabus and used the same course book series (the first-year and second-year learners used the course book on A1 and A2 level, respectively). Both groups were exposed to the same amount of the English language lessons, i.e. 3 hours per week and the subjects were assessed according to uniform assessment regulations imposed by the school and used by both language teachers.

## 2 PROCEDURE

As peer assessment appeared to be a new technique for the teachers participating in the quasi-experiment, its practical implementation in the classroom was preceded with a thorough theoretical and practical introduction of this form of assessment. This introductory training aimed to familiarise the teachers with different types of peer assessment, methods of implementing this approach in reference to different tasks as well as possible assessment criteria. Moreover, the researcher provided an ongoing support to the teacher throughout the treatment in respect to the task choice and assessment criteria.



Peer assessment was administered to assess a variety of tasks, for instance, oral presentations, written homework, dictation, grammar exercises, posters and other in-class activities. At the beginning, the learners conducted peer assessment in groups or pairs but as they gained more experience, individual work was encouraged. Each time peer assessment was conducted, the teacher selected the criteria that matched the task, e.g. the use of certain structures or vocabulary, conveying specific information, neatness (e.g. in the case of posters), etc. The criteria were delineated to the learners before assigning a task so that they would have a chance to implement them in the exercise they were supposed to prepare. Moreover, the learners were presented a detailed scale on the basis of which they needed to grade their peers' performance and give justification of their judgement. Peer assessment was not always grade-oriented, for instance, in the case of a dictation, the learners attended to the spelling errors and, instead of giving a single grade, the corrected works were then discussed in pairs. The feedback on the tasks was conducted in front of the whole group, and the learners had to recall the criteria in order to justify the suggested grade. In some cases the teacher collected the work and the outcomes of peer assessment and corrected the tasks himself. The learners were not graded for peer assessment; however, a 'plus' was awarded for impartial and diligent work, and a 'minus' was given to the learners who intentionally assessed their peers in a biased and subjective way.

The impact of the applied treatment on learner autonomy was analysed by means of three research instruments: the questionnaire administered at the beginning and at the end of the quasi-experiment, monthly classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with the subjects at the end of the research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the questionnaire before and after the treatment in the experimental group report a small rise in the overall level of autonomy; however, the dependent t-test calculated for the whole test as well as for individual subscales implies that the observed differences in results before and after the treatment are of no statistical significance. This value of the t-test suggests that the implementation of peer assessment exerts neither a positive nor a negative effect on the subjects' level of autonomy. An analogous statistical analysis of individual questionnaire items indicates that statistically significant differences can be observed in 3 questions: 5, 27 and 31. With the critical value of  $t$  amounting to  $t_{crit}=2.08$ , an increase in question 5 ( $t_{obs}=2.447$ ;  $p=0.025$ ) suggests that the learners have become more independent of the teacher in the choice of learning resources and tasks. The observed value of  $t$  in question 27 amounts to  $t_{obs}=2.090$  ( $p=0.05$ ) and the increase in mean values informs that after the treatment the subjects learnt from their peers to a larger extent than at the onset. Finally, the analysis

of questionnaire item 31 ( $t_{\text{obs}}=3.009$ ;  $p=0.007$ ) reveals a drop in the level of autonomy – in the course of the treatment the learners tended to lose interest in further work when, despite studying, they received a bad mark.

In the case of the control group, the measurements conducted before and after the treatment indicated that the results increased on 4 subscales (1, 2, 4 and 6) and declined on subscales 5 and 7. Still, the differences are too insignificant to draw any valid conclusions in reference to a rise or fall both in the overall level of autonomy and separate subscales. No change in the level of autonomy could be observed on subscale 3. The conducted statistical analysis showed that the differences between the pre- and post-test results are significant (with  $t_{\text{crit}}=2.08$ ) only in terms of questions 7, 11 and 14. Question 7 ( $t_{\text{obs}}=2.134$ ;  $p=0.045$ ) revealed a fall in the level of autonomy as towards the end of the quasi-experiment the learners tended to perceive their progress as conditional to the attractiveness of the lessons. A significant difference was also observed in question 14 ( $t_{\text{obs}}=2.89$ ;  $p=0.009$ ), according to which the subjects were less aware of their strengths and weaknesses when the questionnaire was administered on the second occasion. A rise, on the other hand, was visible in item 11 ( $t_{\text{obs}}=3.215$ ;  $p=0.004$ ), which indicated that at the end of the research the subjects more frequently sought the possibilities of using L2 outside school.

The qualitative instruments, i.e. monthly observations and interviews with the learners, helped to account for the results obtained by means of the questionnaire and additionally offered a valuable overview of the learning and teaching process as well as allowed the researcher to observe a number of autonomous behaviours that recurred throughout the treatment. The outcomes of qualitative instruments are presented below in sections devoted to the seven subscales pertaining to different aspects of autonomy analysed in this research.

The analysis of subscale 1, focusing on the ability to select and implement relevant resources, showed that both the learning and the teaching processes were predominantly based on the obligatory course book and workbook. Additional materials, such as dictionaries or handouts provided by the teachers, were applied only occasionally. The rise in learners' independence in the choice of learning resources and tasks observed in the experimental group might have resulted from the fact that some of the tasks to be peer-assessed exceeded the content of the course book and required the learners to look for materials in other sources. The process of preparing an exercise subsequently subjected to peer assessment necessitated the use of visual materials, such as pictures or maps, as well as some factual information found in an encyclopaedia or on the Internet. Still, it was not observed that the ability to select and implement resources, so evident in carrying out an assessment task, was also employed in other areas of classroom procedure.

When it comes to the collaborative skills (subscale 2), the information gathered on the basis of the qualitative research tools revealed that individual work and the teacher-learner(s) contact constituted the prevailing interaction



pattern in the observed groups. As reported in the interviews, pair- and group-work were used in the classroom rather rarely. Collaborative work was more likely to occur when the learners were involved in the peer assessment procedure, which might have accounted for the significant difference in questionnaire item 27 reported in this group. According to the obtained answers, in the course of the treatment the subjects appeared to notice that they can learn not only from the teacher but also from their peers. A limited number of collaborative tasks might have resulted in the fact that neither the questionnaire nor the researcher's observation revealed any other changes concerning collaboration in both research groups during the quasi-experiment.

Classroom observations in both research groups did not reveal any changes in the ability to establish learning aims and objectives (subscale 3) in the course of the treatment. Instructional planning and learning objectives were based on the course book and the syllabus. The learners were neither informed about the aims of the learning process nor encouraged to formulate any learning objectives; consequently, they based their language learning entirely on the sequence of lessons proposed by the teacher. This situation was also reflected in the data obtained in the questionnaires in both groups as the mean results on this subscale were relatively lower when compared to subscales representing other aspects of learner autonomy. A very low level of autonomy obtained both before and after the experiment in questionnaire item 1, in which the learners declared that the teacher should plan their learning and tell them exactly what to do, suggests that the subjects were generally pleased with the teacher-centred classroom. Moreover, as the mean values of standard deviation calculated for this item were the lowest in comparison with the remaining questions in the questionnaire, it can be stated that the learners were exceptionally unanimous in this assertion. Classroom observations did not expose any changes in the ability to establish aims and objectives throughout the experiment.

When asked about their engagement in outside classroom learning (subscale 4), the majority of learners admitted that they spent very little time on L2 learning at home and, if they did, it occurred mainly when they had to do their homework or prepare for a test. Such attitudes were particularly visible in the experimental group, in which the mean results in the autonomy questionnaire on subscale 4 were relatively low. Apart from the school-related activities, the interviewed subjects adopted different measures in order to improve their language competence also individually and without the teacher's supervision. It occurred that they applied diverse techniques, such as watching films in the original language version, reading magazines for English learners, translating songs into L1, looking for new words in the dictionaries or on the Internet. However, the application of these elements was incidental and did not constitute a coherent plan aiming at achieving a significant language gain. The learners' engagement in outside classroom learning did not seem to change during the experiment in the research groups.

Some changes, however, could be observed in the learners' ability to evaluate their own learning process (subscale 5). The observations revealed that, in general, the learners were not encouraged to self-assess their own performance or progress. It was the teacher who was responsible for providing feedback on all aspects of language learning. The researcher's observation of lessons during which feedback on the test results was administered indicated that the learners were more interested in the grades they obtained than in the progress they made. This tendency might have resulted in the fall in the mean results in item 31 in the peer assessment group in which the subjects stated that they would not engage in further work when, despite studying, they received a bad mark. This was confirmed in the interviews about the subjects' attitudes to the teacher (subscale 7), during which the learners admitted that they would study less if the teacher was less demanding because they generally tried to pass the subject at the least possible cost. Still, the monthly observation failed to provide data that would directly link this result with the administration of peer assessment.

Although the learners were generally not interested in the feedback provided by the teachers (e.g. after a test or a written task), they appeared to pay close attention to the comments they received from other learners in the process of peer assessment. It complies with the assertion made by Black et al. (2003) that learners do not mind receiving criticism from their peers; what is more, they are likely to pay more attention to the comments suggested by their friends rather than the teacher. Peer assessment allowed the learners to see and correct other learners' work, which enabled them to compare their own mistakes with those of others and, in the long run, helped them attend to their own language problems.

Asked to express reasons for their judgement, in most cases the subjects were able to provide justifications based on the criteria and scales provided by the teacher. However, there were a few learners (4 out of 22 subjects in the group) who tended to be highly subjective and conditioned their evaluation on the grade or opinion their work had received from other subjects. Another problem stemmed from the insufficient level of proficiency due to which some learners found it extremely difficult to attend to the accuracy criterion, and thus were unable to peer-assess their friends' work without the teacher's supervision. It must be underlined, however, that accuracy was only one of the criteria employed in peer assessment and the learners were encouraged to focus on a wide range of aspects.

Monthly classroom observations and interviews with the learners failed to yield evidence suggesting that the implementation of peer assessment affected the learners' efficient use of learning strategies (subscale 6). The results of the interviews indicated that the subjects used a wide range of language learning strategies; however, the conducted observations indicated that their effectiveness might be arguable. Memorisation of grammar rules, learning vocabulary in isolation, reading new words according to their spelling, reviewing all the material on one occasion – these techniques are hardly likely to contribute to the

development of communicative language competence. It must be underlined that such ineffective use of strategies might have resulted from the fact that strategy training was not implemented in the observed classrooms and, as it was reported in the interviews, the learners to a large extent relied on their own initiative in the choice of learning strategies.

Similarly, the results obtained in subscale 7 did not indicate any substantial change in the subjects' attitudes toward the teachers and their role in education. It appeared that even though the research groups were taught by two different teachers, their teaching styles, methods or approaches to the learners did not differ much. The whole teaching process was directed by the teacher who was responsible for all decisions in the classroom. Such a traditional approach to teaching was accepted by the learners in both research groups who almost unanimously agreed that the teacher should be in charge of the whole learning process, testing and taking decisions concerning, for instance, the choice of learning resources or particular classroom tasks.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is believed that peer assessment entails certain classroom procedures promoting autonomy, e.g. goal-setting, establishing assessment criteria, self-assessment, an increased amount of collaborative work or tasks requiring reference to additional materials. However, on the basis of the results obtained in this study it can be concluded that peer assessment does not affect the level of autonomy in lower secondary school learners in the selected context. Although this type of assessment is widely acclaimed for its formative value and significant role in developing autonomy, these qualities failed to occur in a fairly grade-oriented educational environment. It must be underlined, however, that this assessment technique did contribute to the emergence of some instances of autonomous behaviour pertaining to different aspects of autonomy selected for the purposes of this research. For instance, the learners were able to apply the assessment criteria in the process of peer assessment or be involved in cooperative learning. The observed autonomous actions, however, were usually of short duration and were not transferred to other tasks. It seems reasonable to assume that peer assessment can be successful in fostering autonomy only when it constitutes a part of a comprehensive and wide-ranging scheme that would incorporate various aspects of language learning. Autonomy training need to be implemented at all stages of the teaching process, such as goal setting, instructional planning, ongoing monitoring of work and evaluation of the final outcomes. The learners also need to be trained how to direct their own learning in self-study situations. Moreover, in order to benefit fully from peer assessment, learners need to be already equipped with certain autonomous behaviours, for instance, to be able to cooperate successfully with peers, evaluate their own progress, select appropriate learning materials or involve in self-assessment.

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