How are our learners learning and participating?
Analysis of self-assessment surveys in an English conversation class

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1. Introduction.

Within the framework of foreign language learning, we as teachers expect our learners to both participate actively in class, and find ways to use the language outside class. However, learners' motivation to participate (or not), and how this affects their learning, is often unclear. In this short study, I report an attempt to investigate these issues by asking learners to assess themselves on participation performance and their learning. The feedback learners receive from this will encourage independent goal setting while helping them to discover gaps in their L2 knowledge. This paper was inspired by other papers on implementing self-assessment activities in Japanese university classes (e.g., Warchulski & Singh, 2017). I will discuss the practical benefits of self-assessment and argue that short end-of-class self-assessment activities can help learners manage their own language learning and set goals for the next class. Given that English conversation classes are usually learner-centered, and active participation is a requirement for successful learning outcomes, it will be argued that self-assessment activities are an effective tool to promote more successful language learning.

2. The Self-Assessment

Chapelle and Brindley (2010, p. 247) define assessment in language teaching and learning as the "act of collecting information and making judgments about a language learner's knowledge of a language and the ability to use it." This can be formal via quantifiable data such as test scores, or informal through alternative means such as student self-assessment (Davies et al., 1999). However, whether assessments are formal or informal, "they all involve the process of making inferences about learners' language capacity on the basis of 'observed performance'" (Chapelle & Brindley, 2010, p. 247). In regards to self-assessment, this 'observed performance' would not be done by the

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teacher, but by the learner, to obtain information about their own learning and to provide informal diagnostic information for motivation, assess their communication ability, and provide accountability by publically demonstrating their achievement of outcomes (Broadfoot, 1987).

As an English conversation class is learner-centered, Warchulski and Singh (2017) noted it would seem inappropriate to only have teachers do the job of assessing their students' learning and decide what level of participation was appropriate for passing a class. Learners are often left in the dark about the teacher's grading practices while being provided with feedback and proficiency levels only at the end of the semester. This situation seems implausible from the learner-centered approach because it disassociates the learner from assessing, managing, and understanding their own development as language learners. Within this background, activities involving learners would seem to support the learner-centered approach, helping learners to critically reflect on learning, and motivate them to participate. Oscarson (1997) notes that this helps them to discover strengths and weaknesses, set realistic goals, and eventually become self-directed.

Self-assessment techniques can vary depending on the lesson content but commonly themed ones include self-correcting tests and exercises, rating scales, learner progress grids, standardized questionnaires and self-assessment batteries (for examples, see Oscarson, 1984; Brindley, 1989; Brown, 2004). Using these techniques there has been some research into understanding how learners are affected and the role it plays in their learning. Chapelle and Brindley (2010, p. 262) note the example given by Cram (1995) that self-assessment should not be taken for granted and teachers should not expect learners to accurately assess themselves without proper guidance or instruction. Secondly, there is a problem of accuracy. The learner cannot properly implement self-assessment tools because their ability appears to be "related to the transparency of the instruments used" (Schmitt, 2010, p. 262). Bachman and Palmer (1989) also suggest that when focusing on accuracy it would be easier for the learner to assess their difficulties rather than what they can do. Finally, other research indicates self-assessment works well when statements are situation-specific and related closely to the learners' experience (Oscarson, 1997; Ross, 1998). Evidence suggests that cultural factors, personality, and psychological traits influence learners' readiness for self-assessment and may skew accuracy (von Elek et al., 1985).

As this was a non-graded activity for the benefit of the students' learning and motivation to participate, I was not overly concerned with the accuracy of the self-assessment. Results were not to be used for final grading purposes, but rather its purpose was to consciously remind learners that their active participation has a direct relationship with their learning. It was a means of helping students measure their own participation and reflect on what areas they had done well in and what areas needed to be improved for the next class. Armed with this diagnostic information, students could be motivated to set their own goals and take charge of their learning. The evidence suggests it can be a beneficial pedagogical tool.

While accurately measuring learners' linguistic proficiency by self-assessment still remains

to be seen as a viable alternative, the pedagogical benefits are of less concern since there have been numerous successful studies on effecting learner outcomes (Warchulski & Singh, 2017). Study results have shown that self-assessment promotes autonomy and increases productivity, provides an awareness of progress, reduces frustration, increases motivation, and creates opportunities for individualization and reflection (Saito et al., 2009). The pedagogical implications match Schmidt's (1990) argument that it necessitates awareness and attention by directing learners to analyze and discover gaps in performance . Studies of pedagogical benefits (Warchulski & Singh, 2017) include a four-year program at American high schools where goal setting matched linguistic proficiency (Moeller, Theiler, & Wu, 2012), a French pronunciation class that improved pronunciation by creating awareness (Lappin-Fortin & Rye, 2014), and an examination of an advanced French-speaking class that helped learners to be cognitively aware of their goals and second language acquisition (Saint-Leger, 2009).

As for Japanese learners at the university level, the pedagogical benefits are notable. According to Warchulski and Singh (2017),

> *Promoting greater learner autonomy and involvement can be particularly beneficial to Japanese university students. While attempts at reform remain ongoing, most Japanese high school students continue to receive instruction in large classes that are lecture-based, and focused primarily upon accuracy and receptive knowledge (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Upon entering university, learners are often placed in classes that seek to promote productive language skills, and a more learner-centered environment. This paradigmatic shift, in which performance and output is evaluated rather than receptive knowledge, can be especially challenging for learners unaccustomed to communicative language teaching. Self-assessment activities are one means of aiding this transition, and clarifying for learners the specific aims of university language classes. By raising awareness of lesson aims, and promoting goal-setting and reflection, they encourage active involvement in the learning process.*

Despite issues with accuracy, we can assume that the pedagogical advantages can be beneficial for the Japanese learner as long as class objectives and expectations are clear. Warchulski and Singh (2017) discuss Littlewood's (1999) useful framework for the Japanese context by making a distinction between two forms of autonomy called reactive and proactive. Proactive form (i.e., expecting learners to be actively engaged in their learning process) is for Western educational frameworks, whereas the reactive form (i.e., taking into account cultural sensitivities with a more gradual approach via support from the teacher) is more applicable for East Asian settings. This implies that teachers are the main source of guidance and must clearly define what is being assessed so that students can react accordingly to this cause and effect framework.

Other considerations should also be taken when implementing self-assessment (Warchulski

& Singh, 2017). Oscarson (1989) suggests performance-oriented versus development-oriented assessments. Performance-oriented would involve assessing language proficiency (i.e., placement testing) and development-oriented (i.e., this paper's focus) assessing learning and influencing attitudes for active participation. Instructors should also take into consideration how to use class time, such that self-assessment doesn't obstruct the lesson. Harris (1997) proposes using the self-assessment as an integral part of the lesson, woven into the class plan (i.e., in the case of this study, implemented at the end of class). Other attention must include elements that are specific to the teaching context (i.e., reflection on active participation and understanding of the class content). Gardner and Miller (1999) claim that a clear purpose and procedure for the assessment is required and that instructors should accordingly provide support. In the Japanese context, this is particularly important since Japanese learners are not usually expected to evaluate their language proficiency or grade their own class participation.

Other papers suggest other potential issues to be taken into consideration. This is of particular concern in Japan, as mentioned previously, due to the lack of experience and passivity common among many Japanese learners. Singh (2014) examined learners' preferences for instructor feedback versus learner-centered feedback. While responses varied, the majority of learners indicated a preference for instructor feedback. The research suggested that learners still prefer the instructor to take a central role in their assessment. Design is also a potential issue. The complexity of the activity may make it harder for learners to use, but would yield greater detail for instructors to examine. On the other hand, even if results are limited, it is advisable that the majority of self-assessment be as simple as possible. This is especially true for learners who are not used to this type of activity. Making it an enjoyable experience would be best advised for giving a learner a chance to reflect upon their learning and get results in real-time. However, more complicated self-assessments that yield greater detail might more be more applicable for motivated learners and lend better assistance to their language learning (Singh 2015; Warchulski & Singh, 2017).

Research into class participation through self-assessment activities in English language learning is minimal. White (2009) cites an unpublished paper by Phillips (2000) that examined class participation in the middle of the semester followed up by teacher-student interviews asking their goals. Brown (2004) also replicates Phillips as one of the few papers that report results of self-assessment criteria that include attendance, asking/answering questions, participating in pair/group work, active listening and peer review.

One particular report of interest from a Japanese context is by Harrison, Head, Haugh and Sanderson (2005). They reported on self-assessment and motivation on class participation at a Japanese university. The research used various self-assessment methods and learner feedback through notebook action logs and class journals in conjunction with class learning and progression, self-evaluation handouts, and learning journals. Questionnaires measuring learner reactions demonstrated that self-assessment might lead to an increase in active participation and L2 communication, more learner reflection on class progress, confidence, and an expanded awareness

of the relationship between active participation and developing language skills. The authors go on to suggest that those who wish to implement self-assessment activities should be aware of some key points to bolster the framework. Some of these key points are repeating the activity and have detailed procedures with a clear purpose, while instructors provide learner support accordingly. The authors conclude that learners can reach their learning potential if they make a connection between self-assessment and class participation, thus making it a useful tool in their language learning (White, 2009).

3. Learners' Context

This self-assessment activity was implemented in a mandatory first-year spring semester English course for pharmacy students named English, Speaking and Listening (ESL) during the last half of the semester. The class comprised 26 students with varying levels of proficiency. Active participation and showing the willingness to use English in class counted for 20% of the final grade, while the remaining 30% and 50% were allotted to an oral presentation and written exam, respectively. Four native speakers of English taught the course and rotated to different classes after the seventh week. The researcher did not implement self-assessment activities in the first half of the semester during the first rotation. Classes were 90 minutes long with the self-assessment activity being done in the last 5 – 10 minutes of class, twice for the last unit on becoming a pharmacist, and twice during speech presentation preparation, along with a self-assessment on listening to student presentations, and a final questionnaire on their reactions (i.e., feelings) on self-assessment. Self-assessment results were not reflected in their final score, but students were consistently reminded to reflect on their participation and find ways to improve. If students showed observable differences in learner-centered behavior, this would help the teacher make a decision on classwork and participation.

4. Materials

The self-assessment handout was prepared in English. There was no explanation in Japanese. Six questions on a 4 point Likert-type scale of frequency (1 never, 2 rarely, 3 frequently, 4 very frequently) questioned students on learning and participation. Depending on the lesson content, the self-assessment statements were as follows:

On becoming a pharmacist,

1. I can understand the teacher's English instructions
2. I can understand the textbook activities.
3. I can understand today's videos in this lesson.
4. I actively participated in class today.
5. I spoke in English today.
6. I tried not to speak in Japanese today.

On speech preparation,

1. I can understand the teacher's English instructions.
2. I can understand the textbook activities.
3. I thought about my speech topic today.
4. I actively participated in class today.
5. I spoke in English today.
6. I tried not to speak in Japanese today.

On listening to student presentations,

1. I can understand the teacher's English instructions.
2. I can understand today's speeches.
3. I actively listened to the speeches.
4. I actively participated in class today (i.e., asking/answering questions, discussion, etc.)
5. I spoke in English today.
6. I tried not to speak in Japanese today.

Four short statements on class performance were also included for self-reflection. Students were encouraged to write their statements in English without fear of error. These statements stayed consistent throughout the course. The statements were as follows:

1. My _____ ability was very good today.
    (e.g., My speaking ability was very good today)
2. I want / need to improve _____.
    (e.g., I need to improve my class participation.)
3. I had trouble with _____.
    (e.g., I had trouble with pronunciation.)
4. I plan to _____.
    (e.g., I plan to review new vocabulary for next week.)

Reflecting on general learning (i.e., overall understanding of class content and confidence in learning the material) was the last question on the self-assessment. The statements were as follows:

1. I know what I learned today. I feel I could teach it to someone else.
2. I almost know what I learned today. I feel I can study by myself and make little mistakes (i.e., there are some gaps).
3. I feel I am still learning. Sometimes I need help, but I am starting to understand.
4. I don't know what I learned today. I don't understand. I need help.

The final questionnaire on feelings regarding self-assessment comprised of seven questions in English using a 4 point Likert-type scale on levels of agreement (1 completely disagree, 2 slightly disagree, 3 slightly agree, 4 completely agree). Statements were as follows:

1. Self-assessment was helpful.
2. I understood why we used self-assessment.
3. Self-assessment helped me participate in class.
4. Self-assessment was a waste of time.
5. Because of self-assessment, I spoke more English in class.
6. I recommend using self-assessment in other English classes.
7. Self-assessment was easy to do.

5. Results and Analysis

The results proved useful in gaining insight into student learning and participation. However the most important results of this paper were students' feelings of this activity and how it affected their class behavior.

Figure 1 shows student responses understanding the teacher's English instructions. It is interesting to note that there was a gradual increase in frequency of understanding. More than half the students understood the teacher's instructions. The gradual increase may explain student's initial apprehension in being with a new teacher and then getting accustomed to the teacher's speaking and teaching style.

Figure 1. Understanding teacher's English instructions
(1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently)

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities	0%	25%	46%	29%
6/14	Textbook activities	0%	12%	60%	28%
6/22	Speech preparation	0%	12%	60%	28%
6/28	Speech preparation	0%	12%	56%	32%
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation day	0%	12%	52%	36%

In *Figure 2, 3*, and *4* the relationship between active participation, speaking English, and trying not to use Japanese in class also revealed some interesting patterns.

Figure 2. Actively participated
(1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently)

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities	4%	25%	58%	13%
6/14	Textbook activities	0%	16%	52%	32%
6/22	Speech preparation	0%	32%	60%	8%
6/28	Speech preparation	0%	20%	44%	36%
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation day	0%	20%	40%	40%

Figure 3. Spoke in English

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities	0%	33%	29%	38%
6/14	Textbook activities	0%	20%	44%	36%
6/22	Speech preparation	0%	56%	36%	8%
6/28	Speech preparation	0%	28%	44%	28%
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation day	4%	12%	40%	44%

Figure 4. Tried not to speak Japanese

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities				
6/14	Textbook activities	0%	32%	60%	8%
6/22	Speech preparation	8%	40%	40%	12%
6/28	Speech preparation	4%	40%	44%	12%
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation day	4%	32%	24%	40%

(Tried not to speak Japanese was added later, therefore there are no responses from the first class.)

The first class with a new teacher saw the lowest participation responses. Students had new seating arrangements, so this may have affected students' willingness to participate with a new group or partner, and being anxious with a new teacher. This similar apprehension is also noted in *Figure 1* as well. From that time forward however, students frequently thought they had actively participated with one exception during speech preparation (e.g., students were working by themselves). This also correlated with speaking English in class and not using Japanese. As students actively participated, they frequently thought that they were using more English in class and less Japanese. This may suggest they were cognitively aware of actively participating in class, which also meant using more English. Favorable participation responses, frequency of using English, and avoiding Japanese increased incrementally throughout the course.

Other responses on statements relating to specific parts of the lesson revealed some insights, but more detailed results are needed to recognize a pattern of learning and participation. *Figure 5* and *6* shows how students thought they participated in listening to their classmates' speeches and their understanding of content.

Figure 5. Actively listened to speeches
        (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently)

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation	0%	24%	32%	44%

Figure 6. Understood speeches

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation	4%	16%	48%	32%

The feedback seems to suggest they correlate with other responses as discussed before. More than half the students responded favorably when listening and understanding their classmates. However, it is interesting to note that nearly one quarter of students responded negatively. This may suggest boredom, lack of understanding speech content, or other reasons that the researcher cannot confirm. To answer this question, a follow-up interview may be appropriate.

In *Figure 7* and *8* represent student responses in understanding textbook content.

Figure 7. Understood textbook activities
        (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently)

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities	0%	8%	57%	35%
6/14	Textbook activities	0%	16%	52%	32%
6/22	Speech preparation	0%	8%	56%	36%

Figure 8. Understood lesson videos

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities	0%	17%	58%	25%
6/14	Textbook activities	0%	28%	52%	20%

Again, favorable responses are prevalent but the researcher believes this feedback is limited in scope. This activity was administered only in the last half the course. In order to see some pattern of learning in regards to understanding textbook content it would have been advisable to start the activity at the beginning of the course. It is interesting to note there are some unfavorable outcomes. This may suggest content being difficult, lack of preparation by the students, or even the teacher may be to blame. However, within these limited responses, students still responded favorably to textbook content.

In *Figure 9, 10,* and *11* represent student responses in speech preparation. These statements were only asked once during the duration of the course.

Figure 9. Thought about speech topic
         (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently)

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/22	Speech preparation	12%	32%	52%	4%

Figure 10. Understood how to prepare a speech

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/28	Speech preparation	0%	16%	60%	24%

Figure 11. Thought about how to improve a speech

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/28	Speech preparation	0%	32%	44%	24%

It is interesting to note on the day students were to prepare their speeches nearly half of them had not thought about a topic. This may suggest a lack of preparation or cognitive awareness of thinking about a topic beforehand. The teacher should have put more effort in reminding students to start thinking about a topic as early as they can in order to better manage their time and preparation. It may be advisable to add this statement in the activity early in the course to see whether or not there is any change in this behavior.

Figure 10 and *11* seems to show favorable learning outcomes with more than half of students reporting that they understood how to prepare a speech and thought about improving it. However, there is a 32% unfavorable response in speech improvement. Either those students did not understand the points given on how to improve a speech or there were other reasons. To answer this question, a follow-up interview may be appropriate.

In *Figure12* represents student responses reflecting on general learning (i.e., overall understanding of class content and confidence in learning the material).

Figure 12. Overall understanding of class content and confidence in learning the material

1. I don't know what I learned today. I don't understand. I need help.
2. I feel I am still learning. Sometimes I need help, but I am starting to understand.
3. I almost know what I learned today. I feel I can study by myself and make little mistakes (i.e., there are some gaps).
4. I know what I learned today. I feel I could teach it to someone else.

Date	Class content	1	2	3	4
6/7	Textbook activities	0%	35%	52%	13%
6/14	Textbook activities	8%	25%	58%	9%
6/22	Speech preparation	0%	22%	61%	17%
6/28	Speech preparation	0%	12%	56%	32%
7/12 – 7/18	Presentation day	5%	17%	48%	30%

Results suggest that student learning was favorable and more than half were confident that they had understood the lesson, though the majority of students felt there were some learning gaps. Results may also reflect a lack of confidence in self-assessing their learning or their ability to clearly understand what they are being asked to assess, e.g., their lack of experience (Singh, 2014). There may even be a sense of modesty in responding to this task.

The statements asking students to comment on their participation, weaknesses, and future study goals showed some common themes (comments edited for clarity):

1. Discussion ability was good, but want speak with confidence.
2. Listening ability was good, but want to improve speaking skills.
3. Forgetting English words and plan to review vocabulary.
4. Enjoyed the class, but couldn't understand the teacher's English, so need to listen more.
5. Speaking ability was good, but couldn't understand new topics. Need to review.
6. Preparing for a speech was easy, but want to improve to get a high score.
7. Pronunciation was good, but had trouble memorizing the speech. Plan to practice hard.
8. Need to participate more so need to use more English.
9. Want to be more fluent. Use more English in class.
10. Had trouble not using Japanese. Will try to think in English.

The final questionnaire asking students about the usefulness of this activity revealed feelings of strong agreement with the activity. *Figure13* represents student responses.

Figure 13. Feelings on self-assessment

	Completely disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Completely agree
SA was helpful	0%	8%	58%	34%
Understood why we used SA	0%	17%	45%	38%
SA helped me participate in class	0%	12%	63%	25%
SA was a waste of time	29%	25%	46%	0%
Because of SA, I spoke more English	4%	25%	54%	17%
I recommend using SA in other English Classes	4%	8%	67%	21%
SA was easy to do	4%	33%	46%	17%

(SA = self-assessment)

The majority of the students found it helpful and understood why this was important for their learning and participation. More than half the responses were in agreement that it helped them participate in class. Surprisingly, 46% thought it was a waste of time. This seems at odds with the positive trend of other responses. Students may have not understood the question and therefore may have answered inaccurately. One of the limitations on getting accurate feedback in an English-only questionnaire may have been a misunderstanding of what is being asked, or as Warchulski

and Singh (2017) suggest, students "are unlikely to have much experience evaluating their language abilities" (p. 105).

Some 71% of students agreed the activity made them speak more English in class, and nearly 88% recommended self-assessment in other English classes. However, the activity was difficult to do, with 37% disagreeing while 63% agreed it was easy to do. This again may reflect their English proficiency levels or their ability to clearly understand what they are being asked to assess, e.g., their lack of experience (Singh, 2014).

Out of 24 respondents, 11 students freely commented in English about their feelings on learning and participation. The comments are interesting to note because they suggest the activities promoted greater learner autonomy, and helped students make the transition from a lectured-based classroom to a more performance and output evaluated learning environment. This would be especially beneficial for first-year students to help them raise their awareness of lesson aims, and promote goal setting and self-reflection (Warchulski & Singh, 2017). Comments are shown as written by students:

1. Because of my self-assessment I enjoy class. Help me improve.
2. Through speech learning and self-assessment my English sentence building and structure got stronger.
3. Self-assessment made this class very easy to understand.
4. Self-assessment I study English now.
5. The class was very easy to take with self-assessment.
6. Class was easier with self-assessment and learning was easier.
7. I can't speak English so I study English because of self-assessment.
8. Self-assessment makes class more enjoyed, but I should more study.
9. I would think self-assessment helped me study and raise English level.
10. Teacher's English and self-assessment made English learning and participation easier for me. I was able to speak English and do my speech, but nervous.
11. Self-assessment will want to practice English very hard.

6. Conclusion

Despite various levels of language proficiency, concerns about accuracy (i.e., activity materials in English only), and lack of experience in self-assessment, the activity benefited students. As this activity was woven into the class plan, the results suggest positive outcomes in promoting class participation, helping students identify their weaknesses, and promote learning management. While providing only limited results, the design was appropriate for the students to understand, though more effort should be made to balance the friction between difficulty and ease of use. Students may have found the activity challenging, especially in the presence of a new teacher. However, with the teacher providing feedback and support, the study suggests students can become acclimatized to

their new learning environment. It provides an opportunity for them to take an active role in their learning, while providing the teacher with some evaluative insight on their class participation.

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