

# Student Self-assessment in ESP: a Study of Students' Learning Perceptions

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This paper describes the results of an investigation into the effectiveness of students' self-assessment analysis (SSA) as a diagnostic technique to obtain students' learning perceptions - and examines its role in improving learning effectiveness in an ESP oral communication program. The students were asked to fill in four self-assessment questionnaires, two during the course and two at the end of the course, to obtain relevant information about their perception of their skills in oral presentation at the time of taking the course and then at the end of the course. The results suggest that SSA can play a significant role by providing wider input into the implementation of an oral communication course and promote its effectiveness.

*Key words:* Self-assessment Questionnaire, ESP, Learner Participation, Learner Autonomy

Este documento describe los resultados de una investigación sobre la efectividad del análisis de la auto-evaluación de los estudiantes, como una técnica diagnóstica para conocer las percepciones de aprendizaje y examina su papel en el mejoramiento de la efectividad del aprendizaje en un programa de Inglés para Propósitos Específicos, con énfasis en comunicación oral. Se pidió a los estudiantes que diligenciaran cuatro cuestionarios de auto-evaluación, dos durante el curso y dos al final del mismo, para obtener información relevante acerca de sus percepciones sobre sus habilidades en presentaciones orales cuando tomaron el curso y al concluirlo. Los resultados sugieren que el análisis de la auto-evaluación de los estudiantes puede jugar un papel significativo al ofrecer un mayor conocimiento sobre la implementación de un curso de comunicación oral y promueve su efectividad.

*Palabras claves:* Cuestionario de Auto-evaluación, Inglés para Propósitos Específicos, Participación del Estudiante, Autonomía del Estudiante

## **Introduction**

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the new IT age involves new paradigms, especially when students are exposed to a world of information through internet and several other means and resources. As the IT revolution has created the concept of a knowledge society, the role of language learners in the teaching-learning process has changed tremendously. It is now widely recognized that learner participation and involvement in instruction represent an important aspect of classroom interaction (Garton 2002: 47), and successful learning probably depends as much on the type of interaction that takes place in the classroom as on the method used (Ellis 1985:143). It has been largely felt that a very important, rather the most important element in the process of teaching any language course is the learner, the student. Students have a wide experience of life, which can be effectively used in the learning process.

However, in spite of growing recognition of the importance of learner participation, there has been little attempt to explore different facets of learner participation in ESP context. Although the pedagogical significance of learner participation through self-assessment has been studied from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, each one illuminating different aspects of the teaching-learning process, there is a definite need for more empirical studies exploring the use of self-assessment as a method for obtaining students' perceptions of their ability at the language skills of speaking for academic and professional purposes in order to obtain effective feedback for refining the instructional plan. In most student self-assessment studies, self-assessment has been seen purely as an assessment tool used by the teachers to involve students in the assessment and evaluation process. In this study, we focus on the use of self-assessment as a 'diagnostic' method (Harris 1997:13) for collecting relevant data about students' learning perceptions in an ESP learning environment.

The purpose of this paper was to explore the use of self-assessment to obtain relevant information about students' perception of their skills in oral presentation at the time of taking the course and then at the end of the course, and find out how students' learning perceptions could provide wider input into the implementation of an ESP oral communication course by generating essential data for reviewing and evaluating the course to improve and promote its effectiveness.

## **Student self-assessment**

Self-assessment as Harris (1997: 12) claims 'produces learners who are more active and focused, and better placed to assess their own progress in terms of communication'. In recent years, the use of self-assessment has been explored to promote learner autonomy and provide students with life-long learning techniques

that will enable them to continue learning English even after leaving formal education. Sullivan and Lindgren (2002: 266) rightly remark that 'self-assessment and reflection upon one's own work' are two essential skills for the student to learn in order 'to become an effective life-long learner'. As self-assessment encourages students to be collaborators in assessment, they develop the habit of self-reflection and learn the qualities of how to judge their current skills. Dam and Legenhausen (1999: 90) argue that learners' ability to reflect critically on their learning is a measure of the effectiveness of the learning environment. They claim that:

"In an autonomous classroom ... (evaluation) is viewed as the pivot of a good learning/teaching cycle ... Evaluation has a retrospective and prospective function, in which the learning experiences of the past are reflected upon and transformed into plans for future action".

Since the need for promoting learner participation can be seen as an integral part of ESP theory and practice, student self-assessment does reflect the pedagogical need of ESP teachers of English to involve their students in the process of learning. When students become partners in the learning process, they gain a better sense of themselves as learners. As students reflect on what they have learned and on how they learn, they develop the tools to become more effective learners. As Sheerin (1997: 56) argues, "learning is more effective when learners are active in the learning process, assuming responsibility for their learning and participating in the decisions which affect it."

As 'the advantages of involving students in self-assessment, and raising their self-awareness of language skills and abilities, are not in doubt' Jordan (1997: 32), self-assessment can be effectively used as a diagnostic method for obtaining relevant information about students' perception of their current proficiency level in a particular area of communicative competence. Providing students with opportunities to assess what they can actually do in the language can help them locate their own strengths and weaknesses and make them think about what they need to do in order to improve the needed skills. As students begin to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and analyze their progress in a particular area, they reflect on their efforts and attempts to learn relevant skills as well as their progress in these skills. 'By encouraging such individual reflection, self-assessment can begin to make students see their learning in personal terms' (Harris 1997: 13).

To be precise, self-assessment in an ESP classroom may serve the following purposes:

- Promote active learning by involving learners in the learning process.

- Provide opportunities to engage learners in interesting and meaningful classroom experiences.
- Provide an individual focus, even in large classes.
- Increase awareness of individual progress in terms of communicative objectives.
- Provide a means of obtaining wider input into the content, design and implementation of an ESP program.

## Method

### Participants

The student self-assessment analyses discussed in this article was part of the course *Oral Presentation Skills*, a second year, 18-week elective ESP course of two contact hours per week for students of Bachelor of Technology in various branches of Engineering i.e., Mining, Mineral, Mining Machinery, Petroleum, Computer Science, Electronics and Mechanical Engineering at Indian School of Mines (ISM), a premier science and technology university in India. There were sixty students organized into six groups according to the branch of engineering that they studied (Table 1). However, students of Mineral Engineering and Mining Machinery were combined together as one group. The groups ranged in size from eight to thirteen.

The English curriculum at Indian School of Mines (ISM) involves teaching intensive language support programs in the first year and three advanced ESP courses, i.e., Oral Communication Skills, Oral Presentation Skills, and English for Professional Communication in the second year. ISM is possibly the first major technical university in India to adopt an ESP approach to language teaching for students of engineering and technology (Singh 1990). During the last sixteen years, the School conducted many workshops, Needs Assessment surveys, Student Feedback Analysis, and took concrete steps to develop its own English language courses tailored to the needs of students following degree courses in engineering and technology (Singh and Sarkar 1993, 1994). As calls have been made in recent years for engineering graduates to be proficient in oral communication skills so that they can function effectively in the workplace, *Oral presentation Skills* (OPS) is quite a popular course among the students in the university here. The OPS course provides the student with an overview of the fundamentals of oral presentation as they apply to the professional world and introduces students to critical oral skills along with their applications in real - life situations.

S.N.	Branch of Engineering	Number of students	Students who opted for OPS
1	Electronics and Engineering	36	11
2	Computer Science & Engineering	34	08
3	Mechanical Engineering	32	08
4	Petroleum Engineering	48	12
5	Mineral Engineering	08	03
6	Mining Machinery	17	05
7	Mining Engineering	41	13
<b>Total</b>		<b>216</b>	<b>60</b>

**Table 1.** *Student classification.*

### **Data collection and self-assessment questionnaires**

All the data collection of the study was carried out within the framework of the students' regular classes. The self-assessment diagnostic questionnaires (SSA-A and SSA- B) developed for the study were based on the survey instrument by M. Oskarsson (1980), regarded as the standard work on self-assessment. The questionnaires were modified according to feedback from students and subject teachers. They contained different areas of focus and asked the students to think about their language level. They contained "I can ..." format due to their simplicity and directness. While underlining the importance of this type of format in self-assessment, Harris (1997:13) rightly argues that they 'are very easy to construct, give students and teacher a good idea of students' initial level, and can be easily adapted for different purposes'. The first questionnaire focused on *general skills* in oral presentation while the second questionnaire sought students' perception of their current level in *specific skills* needed to make effective presentations. Copies of the questionnaires for administration to the students were given to them in the classroom at the start of the OPS programme. The same questionnaires were given to the students at the end of the course.

## **Results and discussions**

### **Pre-teaching student-self assessment data**

The results of SSA taken in the beginning of the course are both interesting and revealing (Refer to Table 2 and 3). The results indicate that students are aware

of their current strengths and weaknesses in the area of oral presentations and need sufficient practice to develop their confidence in speaking. They need special emphasis on the teaching of organization in presentations, audience analysis, and on impromptu and persuasive presentations.

General skills		Agree	Disagree
I can			
	speak English with competence and confidence.	23.33 %	76.66 %
	give a well-organized, dynamic presentation.	6.66 %	93.33 %
	make an impromptu presentation on any given subject.	11.66 %	88.33 %
	give technical presentations.	15 %	85 %
	deliver persuasive presentations.	5 %	95 %
	take part in group discussions.	33.33 %	66.66 %
	deliver a presentation from speaking notes.	18.33 %	81.66 %
	participate in a classroom seminar.	45 %	55 %
	deliver informative presentations.	13.33 %	86.66 %
	present a speech of self-introduction.	50 %	50 %

**Table 2.** *Students' self assessment: General skills (SSA-A).*

As you can find in the table, 76.66 % students think they cannot speak English with confidence while 93.33 % students cannot give a well-organized, dynamic presentation. 88.33 % students feel they cannot make an impromptu presentation on any subject they are assigned whereas 85% students feel they cannot give technical presentations. Ninety five percent students do not feel confident about presenting a persuasive talk. On the other hand, 33.33 % students are confident that they can take part in group discussions while only 18.33 % of them feel they can give a short extemporaneous presentation from speaking notes on a subject of their choice. Moreover, 45% of the students are sure they can participate in a classroom seminar. Only 13.33 % students think they can deliver informative presentations while 50% of them think they can present a speech of self-introduction.

As you can see the results of self-assessment in specific skills show that 88.33 % students think they cannot list and describe several methods of introducing a presentation and cannot use the technique of audience analysis to present a short presentation to a specific audience. Ninety five percent students cannot apply principles of effective reasoning to develop a persuasive message. Well, 71.66 % of

Specific skills		Agree	Disagree
I can			
11	list and describe several methods of introducing a presentation	11.66 %	88.33 %
12	use the technique of audience analysis to give a short presentation to a specific audience	11.66 %	88.33 %
13	apply principles of effective reasoning to develop a persuasive message.	5 %	95 %
14	orally describe and interpret non-verbal data, e.g., graphs, tables, diagrams, charts, plans, maps	28.33 %	71.66 %
15	list and describe several methods of concluding a presentation	28.33 %	71.66 %
16	develop a blueprint for a presentation by combining the central idea and a preview of the main ideas	26.66 %	73.33 %
17	develop and use visual aids for making a presentation effective.	26.66 %	73.33 %
18	prepare a preparation outline and a delivery outline for a presentation.	66.66 %	33.33 %
19	list and describe the key steps in preparing and presenting a talk.	18.33 %	81.66 %
20	list and describe several patterns for organizing the main ideas of a presentation.	3.33 %	96.66 %

**Table 3.** *Students' self assessment: Specific skills (SSA-B).*

them feel they cannot orally describe and interpret non-verbal data and cannot list and describe several methods of concluding a presentation. However, 26.66 % students think they can develop a blueprint for a presentation by combining the central idea and main ideas, and can develop and use visual aids for making a presentation effective. 66.66 % of them say they can prepare a preparation outline and a delivery outline for a presentation. 18.33 % of the students think they can list and describe key steps in preparing and presenting a talk whereas only 3.33 % students think they can list and describe several patterns for organizing a presentation.

So, from the pre-teaching student-self assessment data, a number of significant points emerge:

- Students are aware of their current strengths and weaknesses in the area of oral presentations.
- They seemed to have some background of teaching in Public speaking.
- They need a course in oral presentation skills.
- They need sufficient practice to develop their confidence in speaking.
- They need intensive teaching of both general and specific presentation skills with particular emphasis on planning and preparing a persuasive talk and delivering impromptu presentations.

These results were discussed with the students in the class. The discussion helped our students to realize that they were not all starting from the same place and they formed a class of mixed ability. This further helped them to see how they compared with the other students in the class, and measured themselves against the overall objectives of the course. The results provided us sufficient insight into the learners' perceptions of their current competence in oral presentation skills and we could make appropriate changes in the focus of the OPS course as well as the teaching materials and methods to be used in the classroom.

#### Post-teaching student-self assessment data

The results of SSA taken after the completion of the course are quite revealing (Refer to Table 4 and Table 5). They indicate students' perception of learning in the course.

General skills		Agree	Disagree
I can			
1	speaking English with competence and confidence	83.33 %	16.66 %
2	give a well-organized, dynamic presentation	78.33 %	21.66 %
3	make an impromptu presentation on any given subject	68.33 %	31.66 %
4	give technical presentations	73.33 %	26.66 %
5	deliver persuasive presentations	78.33 %	21.66 %
6	take part in group discussions	93.33 %	6.66 %
7	deliver a presentation from speaking notes	93.33 %	6.66 %
8	participate in a classroom seminar	93.33 %	6.66 %
9	deliver informative presentations	83.33 %	16.66 %
10	present a speech of self-introduction	96.66 %	3.33 %

**Table 4.** *Students' self assessment after the completion of the course: General skills (SSA-A).*



As you can find in the Table-3, now only 16.66 % students think they cannot speak English with confidence and 21.66 % students feel that they cannot make a well-organized, dynamic presentation. While 31.66 % students still feel they cannot make an impromptu presentation on any subject they are assigned, only 26.66 % students feel they cannot deliver technical presentations. 21.66 % students still do not feel confident about presenting a persuasive talk whereas now 93.33 % of the students are confident that they can take part in group discussions, can deliver a short extemporaneous presentation from speaking notes, and can participate in a classroom seminar. 83.33 % of students feel confident that they can deliver informative presentations and 96.66 % students feel they can present a speech of self-introduction.

Specific skills		Agree	Disagree
I can			
11	list and describe several methods of introducing a presentation	100 %	Nil
12	use the technique of audience analysis to give a short presentation to a specific audience	100 %	Nil
13	apply principles of effective reasoning to develop a persuasive message.	83.33 %	16.66 %
14	orally describe and interpret non-verbal data, e.g., graphs, tables, diagrams, charts, plans, maps	85 %	15 %
15	list and describe several methods of concluding a presentation	93.33 %	6.66 %
16	develop a blueprint for a presentation by combining the central idea and a preview of the main ideas	93.33 %	6.66 %
17	develop and use visual aids for making a presentation effective.	83.33 %	16.66 %
18	prepare a preparation outline and a delivery outline for a presentation.	100 %	Nil
19	list and describe the key steps in preparing and presenting a talk.	100 %	Nil
20	list and describe several patterns for organizing the main ideas of a presentation.	78.33 %	21.66 %

**Table 5.** *Students' self assessment after the completion of the course: Specific skills (SSA-B).*

As you can see the results of self-assessment in specific skills (SSA-D) show that all the students think they can list and describe several methods of introducing a presentation, use the technique of audience analysis to present a short presentation to a specific audience, prepare a preparation outline and a delivery outline for a presentation, and can list and describe key steps in preparing and presenting a talk. However, 16.66 % students still feel they cannot apply principles of effective reasoning to develop a persuasive message, 15 % can not orally describe and interpret non-verbal data, and 6.66 % of them feel they can neither develop a blueprint for a presentation by combining the central idea and main ideas nor can they list and describe several methods of concluding a presentation. 16.66 % students think they cannot develop and use visual aids for making a presentation effective. Well, 21.66 % of them still feel they cannot describe several patterns for organizing a speech.

### **Comparison of pre-teaching and post-teaching self-assessment**

A comparison of SSA-1 and SSA-2 provide a clear perception of learning. The results indicate that students think that the course has been effective in making them overcome their weaknesses in the area of oral presentation and they have improved their public speaking skills. The following significant points emerge:

- Students have been able to improve their specific skills in oral presentation more effectively than their general skills. However, they still need to develop their confidence in speaking. The course needs to focus on improving general oral communication skills.
- They could overcome their weaknesses in the area of professional oral presentation.
- Students have been able to improve specific skills in professional presentation but they still need to improve skills to verbalize data during presentations, to develop and use visual aids for making a presentation effective, and have to learn the techniques to apply principles of effective reasoning to develop a persuasive message.
- They need more practice in oral presentation, particularly in impromptu presentations, persuasive presentations and technical and professional presentations.

### **Conclusion**

Every ESP teacher should respect students' perceptions about their level of competence in different areas of communication. Students' self-assessment can prove to be an effective tool for getting relevant information about students' perception

of their current proficiency level in a particular area of communicative competence, and can provide effective feedback for refining the instructional plan in the ESP learning situation. Though our experience has been exploratory and confined to only six groups of ESP students of mixed ability, ESP practitioners in other disciplines elsewhere may also explore further possibilities of using student self-assessment so that it could become an essential component of not only needs assessment surveys but also ensures realization of 'specific purposes' of FL/SL teaching as far as developing oral communication competence is concerned.

Moreover, despite the fact that the present study is limited to a particular context, the results would seem to be compatible with second language acquisition studies concerning the creation of learning experiences and opportunities. It is suggested that student self-assessment can play an important role in any language learning programme by providing wider input into the content, design and implementation of any ESP course. The results show that students can be trained to use self-assessment in their oral performance. On the basis of this, the conclusion is that encouraging learner participation through SSA may have positive outcomes on successful language learning, and ESP teachers, particularly those teaching oral communication courses, should therefore seek practical ways of introducing this input into their ESP classrooms.

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