Role of Systematic Formative Assessment on Students' Views of Their Learning

El papel de la evaluación formativa en las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre su aprendizaje

Hugo Nelson Areiza Restrepo*
Universidad del Valle, Colombia

This article presents a partial report of a small qualitative research study that explored the students' views of their learning during and after the implementation of formative procedures such as self-assessment, feedback, and conferences. The article also includes their perceptions about this implementation. The research was carried out with a group of students of English enrolled in an extension program of a Colombian public university. The results showed that formative assessment helped these learners to be aware of their communicative competence and to perceive the situations in which they developed this awareness; it also enabled them to experience success in their learning. Also, learners identified the purposes of this kind of assessment and perceived formative assessment as a transparent procedure.

Key words: Autonomy, formative assessment, metacognition.

Este artículo presenta el reporte parcial de un pequeño estudio de investigación de tipo cualitativo que exploró las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre su aprendizaje durante y después de la implementación de una evaluación formativa sistemática y sus visiones sobre este tipo de intervención. El estudio se llevó a cabo en un grupo de estudiantes de inglés pertenecientes a un programa de extensión de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en una universidad pública colombiana. Los resultados mostraron que la evaluación formativa ayudó a estos estudiantes a ser conscientes de su competencia comunicativa y a reconocer las situaciones en las que se generó tal conciencia; además, también les permitió experimentar éxito en su aprendizaje. Asimismo, los estudiantes identificaron los propósitos de este tipo de evaluación, la cual percibieron como un proceso transparente.

Palabras clave: autonomía, evaluación formativa, metacognición.

* E-mail: hugoareiza@gmail.com

This article was received on July 1, 2012, and accepted on May 10, 2013.

Introduction

Not until recently has there been an increased interest in formative assessment (FA) as a student-centered procedure that informs teachers and students about students' learning. It is the springboard for students to take control of their learning and for teachers to align their instruction to their learners' needs. There is much literature and research about FA but little has been reported in our local academic community on our reflections and practices as teachers regarding FA, its connections to metacognition and autonomous learning, and the advantages and drawbacks of implementing it. Some works, however, have been reported on this issue (Ahumada, Bonilla, & Del Campo, 2010; Arias & Maturana, 2005; Ariza, 2008; Ariza & Viáfara, 2009; Bernal & López, 2009; Cárdenas, 2010; Cortés & Sánchez, 2005; Martínez, 1996; Rodríguez, 2007; Sierra & Frodden, 2003; Torres, 2009). Furthermore, the findings of some of these studies may partially explain why there is not much literature on FA locally. Bernal and López (2009) conducted research about the perceptions of some Colombian languages teachers on language assessment and the way they use it in the classroom. They concluded that teachers who did not receive instruction on evaluation did not relate assessment to enhancing learning. They also concernedly reported that a few universities in Colombia offered instruction in evaluation to languages teachers. Moreover, Arias and Maturana (2005) also conducted qualitative research on the discourses and practices on assessment of some English teachers in a public university and found out that there were confusions in their understandings and practices on language assessment in the classroom, and that the kind of FA they provided lacked systematicity, rigor, and continuity. These studies may indicate our still limited understanding of all concepts beneath assessment in both our practices and discourses.

Autonomy in Language Learning and Formative Assessment

For this study it was necessary to first understand the complexity of conceptualizing learner autonomy, how the development of metacognitive skills may promote it and how some research has explored this issue. Sinclair (1999), in a survey review of publications on *autonomy* in language learning, identified four views of autonomy that should be carefully interpreted within a particular, social, political, and educational context. One view is that it is concerned with providing learners with opportunities for exercising a degree of independence. Another view is that it involves or includes a capacity for making informed decisions about one's learning, and this capacity needs to be developed through introspection, reflection, and experimentation in the form of "learner training" or some other kind of intervention by a facilitator. Another view considers that such a capacity can be developed only through social and collaborative learning, rather than any intervention. For others, it is a question of learners' rights, or freedom from constraint, and represents an opportunity for social transformation. These different views agree on the fact that autonomy implies students making decisions that transform them and their surroundings whether there is an intervention or not.

Littlewood (1999) proposes two types of autonomy: *proactive* and *reactive*. The former suggests a "natural" drive of some learners to take control of their learning and is more present in Western cultures while the latter implies some kind of input aimed at promoting such a drive in those who are not autonomous and is particularly for learners in the East Asian cultures. It may also turn into a preliminary stage towards proactive autonomy. Rivers (2001) illustrated this proactive autonomy among experienced language learners taking another language for their first time through an ethnographic

study. The data were gathered in 1993 and 1994 from 11 learners of Georgian and Kazakh at the University of Maryland at College Park. He found out that these students exhibited three common types of behaviors: self-assessment of progress and learner style/learning strategy preference issues, learner autonomy, and self-directed language learning. These experienced language learners accurately assessed their learning styles, any learner-teacher style conflicts, and any learner style conflicts within the class. They demonstrated a high tendency towards autonomy and used self-directed language learning strategies to modify the learning environment and aspects of their learning, including type of input, workload, and course structure. Hence, these behaviors or characteristics of autonomous learners and other successful language learners, as Rubin (1975) reported, may serve as models or examples for those who are not and need to attain those skills necessary to self-regulate their learning. They can achieve this by providing them opportunities to develop those skills.

In language education specifically, Cotterall (2000, p. 109) argues that "autonomy . . . is not a goal only for highly committed students but is an essential goal of all learning." Little (1999) explains that the development of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degrees of success. Hence, autonomy is inherently related to *metacognition*. Peters (2000) and McMillan (2010) define metacognition as the ability of learners to be aware of and monitor their learning. Rivers (2001) complements this definition by stating that metacognition embraces two executive functions: self-assessment and self-management. His reports of metacognition research studies imply that in formal settings teachers can promote metacognition taking into consideration the stress on self-assessment abilities before stressing the implementation on self-management ones. Therefore, metacognitive skills make up part of the development of autonomous learning and may possibly be triggered through FA.

Assessment is a systematic ongoing process that determines to what degree of complexity students know and understand aspects of the curriculum, and how well they demonstrate that understanding. There are different classifications of assessment of language learning such as traditional or alternative, or according to the learners' expected response (Brown, 2004; Brown & Hudson, 1998; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; O'Malley & Valdez, 1996; Oosterhof, 2003). Nonetheless, the most simple and practical classification of assessment relies on its purpose (Arias, Areiza, Estrada, Marín, & Restrepo, 2010). Then, assessment can become *summative* or *formative*. The former is comprehensive and attempts to summarize students' learning at some point in time or cycle, or at the end of a course or a whole language program (Cizek, 2010; Hadji, 1999; Pryor & Torrance, 2002). Hadji (1999) points out that summative assessment is characterized by those tasks which determine if learners have achieved the goals as regards the standards of a course or a program. Conversely, the latter is a common classroom procedure that focuses on the learning process and it is by nature diagnostic, remedial, regulatory, ongoing, self-regulating, timely, and accurate (Arias et al., 2010; Cizek, 2010; De Ketele & Paquay as cited in Jorba & Casellas, 1997). FA occurs when teachers facilitate students' understanding of their own learning in ways that enable them to learn better, plan their learning by doing something with the information that is delivered to them in a comprehensible language. Arias et al. (2010) and Cizek (2010) affirm that FA be provided through learning cycles which allow them to set learning goals and a road map to attain them.

Instead of opposing summative and formative evaluation as the literature often proposes, Delgado

(1998) rather suggests a coherent and complementary relationship. Assessment is not only referred to as just rewarding and punishing by grading and calculating these accumulative grades as summative assessment usually becomes, but as an attempt to understand how students are learning. This understanding necessarily leads to provide teachers' feedback to students and promote their self-reflection and self-regulation. Hence, providing proper FA also leads to accurate summative assessment (Estrada & Vallejo, 2006).

FA can happen in varied forms such as self- and peer-assessment, portfolio assessment, or student-generated tests to quote some examples. However, the ones that seem fundamental in raising students' awareness as a key to promote self-regulation are students' self-assessments and teachers' feedback.

Self-assessment is an "appraisal by a student of his or her own work or learning process" (O'Malley & Valdez, 1996, p. 240); it is generally students' insights on strengths, weaknesses, and ways of improvement. Watson (2002) reports several reasons for using self-assessment and justifies it from a learner's autonomy lens: It is a prerequisite for a self-directed learner and can raise learners' awareness of language, effective ways of learning, and their own performance and needs; and it also increases motivation and goal orientation in learning. Furthermore, some aspects of language learning, such as effort and learner beliefs can be assessed only through self-assessment; and it can reduce the teacher's work load.

Brown (2004) has identified four types of self-assessment: *assessment of a specific performance* in which a student assesses his or her performance, *indirect assessment of competence* which is a student's perception of his or her general language ability, *metacognitive assessment* that is strategic in nature and aimed at planning and monitoring learning, and *socioaffective assessment* whose purpose is to reflect on affective factors in learning. These four types of self-assessments can be presented combinatively to the learner depending on the particular characteristics and purposes of the teaching scenario.

If students' self-assessment is their perceptions of their learning, teachers' feedback is the experienced voice of learners' progress and constraints. Both learners' and teachers' perceptions are equally important in a democratic classroom and provide a more accurate panorama of what learners are doing and the input for students' self-regulation. Feedback is the result of interaction between the teacher and students about the learning process. After a test or a performance task, students always want to know how they did on it. Brown (2004) supports the idea that scoring and grading would be incomplete if the teacher does not offer feedback to students with information that will help them self-regulate their learning and the teacher direct her/his practice as well.

It is possible to nicely "confront" students' and teachers' voices of their learning in a scenario such as *conferences*. Brown (2004) refers to conferences as a routine part of language classrooms that may facilitate the academic improvement of students. Such interaction offers the great advantage of one-on-one interaction between teacher and student, and the teachers' being able to direct feedback targeted to students' specific needs. For Brown (2004, p. 265), in a conference "the teacher plays the role of a facilitator and guide, . . . not of an evaluator. In this intrinsically motivating atmosphere, students need to understand that the teacher is an ally who is encouraging self-reflection and improvement." This teacher-student friendly talk may be encouraged through generic questions which often relate to students' achievements and drawbacks at any cycle of their learning process, and often seek to offer positive "washback". Conferences are by nature formative and are not to be scored or graded.

No one can deny that students' self-assessment, conferences, or teachers' feedback may happen incidentally and have a positive impact on students'

learning and on teaching; nonetheless, it is unpredictable when these may occur, but any kind of FA should be planned and implemented on a regular basis. That is why good quality FA is guaranteed if it is provided with rigor, systematicity, and continuity so it attains its purpose (Arias et al., 2010).

Some research on FA and its connections to metacognition and autonomy has tried to explain this intrinsic relationship to the benefit of the learner and as a guideline to the teacher. One of the most well-known works regarding FA is a lengthy literature review by Black and Wiliam (2006). They conducted research between 1988 and 1997 and analyzed empirical work with both qualitative or quantitative evidence on issues related to the practices and understanding of FA. They ranged over various age groups across several school subjects and involved several countries. This lengthy work was not an easy task for the researchers because the research reports they analyzed lacked sufficient detail about the practical use of the methods. Furthermore, they argue that successful implementation of methods of this kind is heavily dependent on the social and educational cultures in the context of their development, so that they cannot be merely "replicated" in a different context. Many were the themes that emerged and, just to quote some relevant to this project, they revealed that innovations, which included strengthening the practice of FA, produced significant and often substantial learning gains. Another finding was related to current teacher practices: The picture that emerged was that FA was weak; in relation to effective learning it seemed that teachers' questions and tests encouraged rote and superficial learning. Furthermore, teachers' feedback to students often seemed to serve social and managerial functions, often at the expense of the learning functions. These findings suggest that FA might be beneficial if it is solely learning oriented and if there is a deep understanding on its underlying principles and implementation.

In Colombia, it seems, there is no any empirical research reported in academic journals regarding FA of any kind in the field of language education, and little qualitative research has been reported. In fact, the findings of Bernal and López (2009) and Arias and Maturana (2005) concluded that there is a need to offer training for languages teachers on assessment of language learning. On the one hand, Arias and Maturana (2005) in their research on assessment practices and discourses of 21 English teachers of two public universities found a confusing coexistence of summative and FA; an imprecise definition of the linguistic construct in terms of skills; excessive emphasis on the organizational—not the pragmatic—area of language knowledge; the importance of non-linguistic aspects in pass/fail decisions; the indiscriminate use of assessment and testing; and the scarce consideration of several assessment task qualities. Moreover, the lack of teachers' work stability, of clear assessment guidelines and agreement, and of formal and systematic recording of assessment results contribute to teachers passing students without the required communicative competence. In addition to that confusing coexistence of summative and FA, the feedback and self-assessment which are key procedures of this kind of assessment were not promoted with the rigor, continuity, and systematicity necessary to fulfill the purpose of FA which is to enhance learning. On the other hand, Bernal and López (2009) conducted research about the perceptions of eighty-two Colombian language teachers on language assessment and the way they used it in the classroom. They found out that their perceptions and practices were related to whether or not they received instruction on evaluation as pre-service or in-service teachers. For instance, those who had it, saw assessment as an integral part of instruction and as a tool to guide the learning process. Conversely, those who did not receive any instruction on evaluation did not

relate assessment to the enhancement of learning. They rather reported evaluation as grading, as an obligation stemming from an administrative request and as a tool to force students to study what is being taught. The researchers also concernedly reported that few universities in Colombia offered instruction in language assessment and general evaluation to languages teachers. Although these studies do not embrace the reality of Colombian languages teachers because of the number of teachers who provided data, it is not a coincidence that the findings and conclusions of these studies suggested confusions on assessment not only in their discourses but also in their practices, and that from the many institutions in Colombia that offered language teacher education only a few offered some kind of instruction regarding evaluation.

However, some qualitative research has been conducted regarding FA of any kind and its connection to metacognition and autonomy. To mention some, Martínez (1996) conducted a small qualitative study on the perceptions of students of ESP courses at a local university on the role of assessment in students' self-control of their learning. The study concluded that when the implementation of assessment shifted to the process of learning rather than the products of learning, students were much more motivated to take control of their own learning. In addition to this, students revealed a capacity for self-evaluation of their goals, expectations, and weaknesses. For them it was important but not essential to get a pass/fail mark in terms of their learning; what really mattered was self-assessing their reading process and self-managing their learning. In this study it would have been very interesting to observe the teachers' voices in relationship to what they observed in those learners.

Sierra and Frodden (2003) implemented a case study aimed at developing student autonomy through the implementation of self-assessment and learning strategies in an English course for students of different academic programs at a well-known university in Medellín. Data were collected from students' reflections on their linguistic and attitudinal problems concerning their learning at the beginning of the course, and their self-assessments on linguistic and attitudinal aspects and students' interviews at the end of the course. Some of the themes that emerged evidenced students' better motivation for language learning, positive attitudes towards their learning and consequently more responsible learners which entitled them to improve their linguistic performance. They also increased their commitment towards the course and began to incorporate metacognitive strategies such as planning and evaluation of their learning process. Another important finding to highlight is the idea that for promoting these positive achievements it is essential that an autonomous teacher, acting as a facilitator, provide psychosocial and technical support. For the first function the teacher requires some personal qualities: the capacity to motivate learners and the ability to raise learners' awareness. Technical support is related to helping learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning, helping learners to evaluate themselves and helping them to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to plan and evaluate their learning. This study clearly shows the relationship between FA in the form of self-assessment aimed at promoting metacognition and self-regulation and at the same time provides some insights on the role of teachers' feedback provided with the sole interest of enhancing students' autonomous learning.

In a qualitative study by Cortés and Sánchez (2005) on profiles of autonomy in the field of languages, they analyzed data from four public university students of a language teacher education program through classroom observations, interviews, and surveys. One of the main findings was that autonomous learners self-evaluated their learning, spotted their weaknesses and strengths, monitored their learning in their pursuit of attaining learning goals, set up learning

goals and considered self-evaluation necessary for improvement. Admittedly, literature has widely shown the characteristics of autonomous learners as this research successfully did in the local context but it would have been very enlightening if it had envisaged how to promote autonomous learning in those learners who were not yet autonomous.

Rodríguez (2007), in a preliminary report of an action research project with a group of 21 EFL learners at a higher education institution which consisted of the implementation of self-assessment practices, analyzed students' samples, journals, and interviews. In one of his findings, he reported positive insights as regards the application of self-assessment materials. Students' self-reported that they had the opportunity to reflect on their weaknesses and strengths. Likewise, they suggested self-assessment practices as a procedure to be implemented across the different levels in the institution and agreed on the fact that self-assessment helped them improve and overcome many of their learning difficulties they had before the implementation. Unfortunately, as a preliminary report, it neither stated the teachers' views of students' improvement as a way to validate this finding nor the role of the teachers' feedback.

Method

This study followed a qualitative-exploratory, descriptive, and interpretive approach (Bonilla & Rodríguez, 1997; Burns, 1999; Johnson, 1992; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001) characterized by an intervention. The study aimed at observing, understanding, and interpreting the role of FA on students' views of their learning and their views on this kind of assessment. The questions that guided this study were:

- What is the role of the implementation of systematic FA on students' views of their own learning?
- How do students perceive this implementation regarding their learning?

The Context

This study took place in a foreign language learning program of a public university in Medellín, Colombia. At the moment of implementation the English program offered a basic program of 10 levels, a 40 hour course each level and some other advanced courses. The program was based on a communicative approach aimed at providing students with the necessary tools to communicate in everyday situations related to social and professional life situations and entertainment.

Participants

Nine students signed a consent form; they were three male and six female students who enrolled as beginner learners of English. Their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years old and they came from very heterogeneous social and educational backgrounds. Their interests in studying English were as varied as their backgrounds; some had an intrinsic motivation to learn, others wanted to learn as a requirement of their current or future jobs or careers, others started studying a foreign language while they could enroll in an undergraduate program in a university, and others took the course as a preparation to travel to an English speaking country.

Implementation of FA

As a teacher of a 40-hour course, I implemented a cycle of FA which consisted of different assessment tasks. The first assessment task consisted of a role play called *Survey in the English Classroom*; it was a survey of student pairs and the objective was to ask and provide personal information in English as surveyors and surveyees. The second was a written task called *Writing an E-mail/Letter* in which students had to write an email/letter to their parents reporting the behavior of a younger brother/sister. After each task, and without knowing my report on their performance, learners filled out a self-assessment

form of their work in that particular task (see Appendix A).[1] The form had generic questions about whether learners reached the expected objectives or not and possible ways to overcome their difficulties. Then, each student requested a short conference with me, during class time, in order to compare what they had self-assessed and what I had assessed on their performance. After this short talk, some students, by their own initiative, decided to do some remedial work if they considered it necessary. At the end of the course, students took an institutional final exam at the end of each level. Later, students filled out a final self-assessment form of their communicative competence, plans to improve, and whether or not they considered they had passed the class objectives (see Appendix B).[2] Finally, we had a conference whose objectives were to find out about their perceptions of their learning process during the course and insights about the impact of the implementation (see Appendix A). Table 1 summarizes the cycle of the implementation in chronological order.

Data Gathering and Analysis

During the implementation phase, data were in the form of a collected document relevant to the research context gathered from the participants' self-assessments and a representation of verbal recordings (Freeman, 1998) which was a transcription of a semi-structured audiotaped interview with students after the course was over (see Appendix B). The instruments served to describe the role of FA on students' learning and their perceptions about this form of assessment. The analysis of data combined inductive and deductive approaches in terms of the presence of each category in the participants' perceptions. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the study (Burns, 1999; Freeman 1998; Johnson, 2002; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001) data and methodological triangulation was applied.

Findings

Data yielded meaningful information to describe the role of FA on students' views of their own learning and their perceptions about its implementation in the course (see Figures 1 and 2).

Table 1. Formative Assessment Cycle

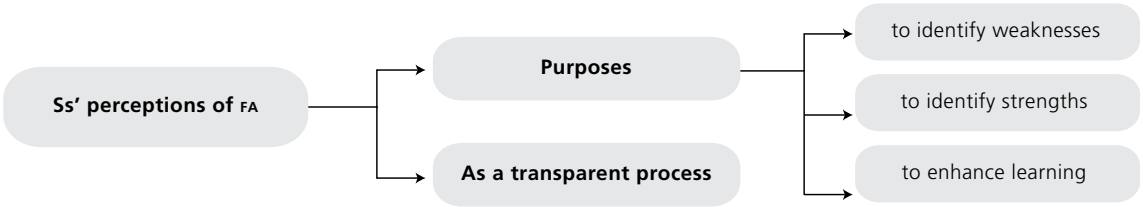
1. Task 1: Role play: Survey in the English class	2. Self-assessment of Task 1	3. Conference on performance of the Task 1	4. Remedial work on Task 1
5. Task 2: Written Task: Writing an e-mail/letter	6. Self-assessment of Task 2	7. Conference on performance of the Task 2	8. Remedial work on Task 2
9. Self-assessment of the whole process		10. Conference or interview on their views of learning and SFA	

1 Students filled out this form in Spanish since they were beginners and their responses were translated from Spanish into English and the questions for the interview are also a translation in English from the original version in Spanish.

2 Students filled out this form in English since they mainly had to mark options and could write comments in Spanish, their native language. The interview was in Spanish and the quotes from this interview were translated from Spanish into English for this article.

Figure 1. Role of FA on Students' Views of Their Learning

Figure 2: Students' Perceptions of FA



The Role of FA on Students' Views of Their Learning

One of my interests throughout this study was to inquire about how FA may influence students' perceptions about their learning. All data collection instruments served to build these perceptions and draw conclusions about the effectiveness of this kind of assessment for enhancing their metacognition and consequently their autonomous learning. Mainly, students reported FA helped them become aware of their weaknesses and strengths in their *communicative competence*[3] and of the situations in which this awareness arose; and thanks to FA they experienced a sense of achievement because they realized they had learned.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Communicative Competence

All instruments but the final self-assessment task did not directly request students to report the weaknesses and strengths of their communicative competence (see Appendixes A and B). Then, students' accounts of their learning were more a by-product of their reflective skills encouraged by very generic prompts. Data depicted a recurrent tendency to refer to strengths in pragmatic knowledge in a far much higher frequency than those in organizational knowledge. Conversely, there was a more recurrent tendency to refer to their weaknesses in terms of organizational knowledge than pragmatic knowledge (see Table 2).

The fact that students provided specific information on their strengths and weaknesses in relationship to what is being learned supports the idea that

3 For the analysis of students' self-assessment of their communicative competence I used Bachman and Palmer (2002) as a reference.

Table 2. Students' Report of Their Communicative Competence

	Pragmatic knowledge		Organizational knowledge	
Instrument	**Strengths**	**Weaknesses**	**Strengths**	**Weaknesses**
Self-assessment of Task 1	9 Ss	3 Ss	5 Ss	5 Ss
Self-assessment of Task 2	6 Ss	No Ss	8 Ss	7 Ss
Final self-assessment	9 Ss	6 Ss	8 Ss	6 Ss
Comments on final self-assessment	2 Ss	No Ss	1 St	7 Ss
Student interviews	9 Ss	1 St	4 Ss	8 Ss

students were able to assess their learning by making explicit that knowledge and those abilities through procedures that helped them think and reflect on what is or is not being learned. It is not surprising that they referred more often to pragmatic knowledge as regards their strengths and organizational knowledge as their weaknesses because during teaching there was far more stress on communication rather than on a descriptive study of the language as the main learning goals; organizational knowledge was presented as a part of what is required to attain communication.

> What did I learn exactly? I learned to introduce myself and request information from other people, who they live with, what they do, their names and ages, if they have a family and children, their marital status, if they work or go to school. (Interview to Student 1, Page 1 transcription)
>
> My main difficulties were the pronunciation, asking questions, and saying numbers, using the possessive pronouns instead of the personal pronouns, saying some letters of the alphabet, and the intonation in questions. (Self-assessment instrument of Task 1, Student 3)

Awareness of Situations in Which Students Realized Their Strengths and Weaknesses

Only data gathered from students' interviews confirmed the situations that resulted in this awareness. Their awareness came to light through different situations which not necessarily involved FA procedures such as assessment tasks, self-assessments, conferences, or remedial tasks, but also classroom situations different from FA procedures, some others outside the classroom and others they did not specify (see Table 3).

Table 3. Awareness of Situations

Situations in which students realized of their learning	Number of students
By FA procedures	5
By classroom situations different from FA	6
Outside the classroom	5
Unspecific situations	5

Regardless of the situations in which students' insights about their learning process emerged, the fact that students reported them through self-assessment instruments and the interviews suggests that the habit of having students exposed to FA and making explicit what they are learning may have triggered an awareness of what they were able to do or not do with the language and what they knew about the language in various situations:

T: How did you realize those difficulties?

S: By the self-assessment tasks and those assessment tasks we had with my classmates I realized that it was difficult to understand them; and by sharing with the teacher.

T: Sharing what with the teacher?

S: Well, talking to the teacher I learned that it was hard for him to understand what I said because I did not pronounce well. (Interview of Student 2, Audiotape 1, Page 6)

T: What experiences made you become aware of that?

S: Classroom experiences specially because in the street one does not have the chance to interact with people who speak English, but in the classroom one realizes that one has made a good progress and that what one has been taught is really helpful. (Interview of Student 1, Audiotape 1, Pages 1-2)

T: How did you become aware of your progress?

S: Mainly because before I was not eager to write but writing about what I do, like my daily routine, I managed to do it and was able to say that I do this or that someone does that, what he or she likes, what I like to do.

T: What activities helped you realize that progress?

S: Writing about the daily routine, I had never written my routine in English. It was there that I said to myself that I had learned and had some basic elements to start a conversation; and when we worked with our partners I realized I can speak about others. (Interview of Student 6, Audiotape 1, Pages 21-22)

T: What events made you realize what you have achieved?

S: Chatting through the Messenger because sometimes I used to hang around trying to use English and failed to, but now I can; and many times by listening to music, talking to other people and no more. (Interview of Student 9, Audiotape 1, Page 9)

Sense of Success Through FA

Most students also experienced a sense of success through FA because they were aware of having achieved something and this awareness arose during FA procedures. In the interviews, seven students reported a degree of satisfaction because they realized they had learned thanks to FA. Students reported some learning outcomes and a kind of satisfaction during different stages of the cycle of FA. This success is evidenced in the different instances used to assess their communicative competence: In the first task, the role-play *Survey in the English Classroom*, seven students achieved the objectives of the task and two agreed on the fact that they did not achieve the task successfully but requested a chance to remediate; and in the remedial work they evidenced they had corrected their problems and achieved the learning outcomes of the task. In the second task, *Writing an E-mail/Letter*, all students successfully completed the task and all of them corrected the minor language problems they had experienced after the conferences. Finally, in the final exam, students demonstrated they were able to use the language properly in the communicative situations proposed for the level. These students passed the course with the basic language tools to use the language properly although they evidenced and self-reported having some language difficulties still:

T: How did you achieve the possibility of catching up with what you should improve?

S: Well, I mean, correcting the mistakes…and then we analyzed and if they were still wrong, I corrected them again. Sometimes one is assessed, and it is just a mark and one did not identify what was wrong, and then one does not correct oneself. And here if it was to correct two or three times, then it was corrected. (Interview of Student 3, Audiotape 1, Page 3)

T: How did you discover having chances to do some remedial work when you failed in one assessment task?

S: One learns from mistakes. I like that and it was very appealing. I had a second chance then we analyzed my writing and I rewrote it and there was still another mistake and I rewrote it until it was fully correct. (Interview of Student 5, Audiotape 1, Page 20)

Students' Views of FA

Another main concern I had throughout this study was to explore students' opinions about the implementation of FA and if it actually fit its purposes. Analysis of data from interviews with students yielded three main findings. Firstly, students reported FA as a procedure that helped them identify their weaknesses and strengths. Secondly, students considered FA as a transparent process in terms of how their learning outcomes and difficulties were reported and the accuracy of the reports of what they actually learned.

Purposes of FA

Students repeatedly asseverated the purposes of FA as a procedure that mainly helped them identify their weaknesses and enhance their learning. They barely indicated FA was intended to spot their strengths. However, in different stages in the course, students were able to report their strengths and weaknesses through self-assessment procedures along the course, namely, self-assessments, conferences, and the final interview which evidenced some of the purposes of FA, that is, to detect students' strengths and weaknesses related to their communicative competence and enable them to make informed decisions about their own learning (see Table 4).

Table 4. Purposes of FA

Purposes of FA	Number of students
to identify weaknesses	9
to improve	9
to identify strengths	3

The fact that most students did not see FA as a procedure that helped them identify their problematic areas even though they were asked to do so in different stages of the cycle was unexpected. This may be due to the fact that in their previous learning experiences, students were used to being assessed and tested and the results of these procedures highlighted what they mainly did wrong or the main difficulties they had. It is as if learning were "measured" as to what students could not learn first instead of what they actually learned:

> T: Do you think making self-assessments is effective?
>
> S: I think it is, I know what I'm failing in. I think that without doing self-assessment as proposed in the classroom, one is not able to self-asses on his own. (Interview to Student 2, Audiotape 1, Page 7)

FA as a Transparent Process

In the interviews, all students identified FA as a transparent process. This was mainly because they built their own visions of their communicative competence and then they compared them with their teacher's vision in order to agree on their learning outcomes and difficulties. Although the reliability of students' self-assessment results in relation to their communicative competence was not the objective of this research, the fact that students in all stages self-reported their learning outcomes and difficulties honestly, made the process transparent. Moreover, the fact that later through conferences they compared what they self-assessed and what the teacher had observed to agree on what they did or did not learn made the procedure far more transparent and the assessment results more accurate and reliable:

> T: How do you feel talking to me when we compared your self-assessment with the assessment I completed about your performance in one task or during the whole course?
>
> S: Usually, we agreed on what I had spotted like my weaknesses. It was like confirming what I had to work on.
>
> T: Did you think that talk was effective?
>
> S: Yes it was. Because if one lies, one does not value what one really has to work on and one would go on regardless that. One has to confront oneself and with the teacher one analyzes, one has to encourage oneself to overcome those difficulties and that is an incentive to learn. (Interview to Student 4, Audiotape 1, Pages 14-15)

In conclusion, FA did help learners form a picture of their learning regarding the strengths and problems of their communicative competence and perceive the situations in which they developed that awareness including those that exposed them to FA; additionally, it endowed them to experience success in their learning. Also, learners labelled the purposes of this kind of assessment as mainly to identify their weaknesses and improve, and barely to identify their strengths. Furthermore, learners observed FA as a transparent procedure.

Pedagogical Implications

Even though we teachers all provide FA in many ways, the lack of systematization and clear focus as regards its purpose is self-defeating. At some point in our careers, we have failed to recognize the formative nature of assessment, its underlying principles and the most suitable alternatives for implementing it in the classroom as the findings suggested by the results of Arias and Maturana (2005), Bernal and López (2009), Black and Wiliam (2006). This implementation is not a model but an example of the principles that guide FA. Clearly, the systematic and rigorous implementation of FA (Arias et al., 2010; Cizek, 2010) by asking students to self-assess their learning, by providing feedback generated by students' and the teacher's insights about their learning, and by encouraging students to do something with that information gathered for the benefit of their learning, actually fostered the self-regulatory attribute of this kind of assessment (Arias et al., 2010; Cizek, 2010; De Ketele & Paquay as cited in Jorba & Casellas, 1997). This kind of proposed assessment also went beyond grading and attempted to understand students' learning from the teacher's and the learners' points of view. These different voices also helped to provide a more accurate summative assessment as claimed by Estrada and Vallejo (2006), who considered that proper FA leads to accurate summative assessment. In the end, proper FA in the classroom focuses teachers' and learners' attention on learning and not on grades, scores, or pass/fail marks.

Equally important, there is no doubt that the path to autonomous learning is the learners' exercise of his/her responsibility to understand one's learning (Little, 1999); but it is the teacher's responsibility to provide learners with those opportunities to exercise it, especially if they are those reactive autonomous learners as Littlewood (1999) coins them. Therefore, FA is a way to provide those opportunities as the participants of this study experienced: They self-assessed their learning in different learning cycles, received teacher's feedback in a friendly and democratic atmosphere by their own initiative, tried to overcome their problematic areas, and had enough transparent criteria to decide on their readiness for their next learning challenge. In order to attain those desired autonomous behaviors from these students they, as stated by Rivers (2001), focused on the development of self-assessment skills which are prior to self-regulation. In addition, encouraging learners to self-assess their learning first and pro-moting their self-regulation later were required to make learning explicit. Accordingly, instruction as well as self-assessment also stressed the use of some metalanguage to refer to learning. These learners started experiencing the capacity that autonomy involves as a certain range of highly explicit behavior that embraces both and the content of learning as explained by Little (1999).

The FA proposal somehow complied with Little's view (1999) that in the autonomous classroom it is essential that the learner be stimulated to develop an awareness of the aims and processes of learning and to develop a capacity for critical reflection, which also implies having students reflect on their strengths/weaknesses and progress in various linguistic skills. Then, the participants in this study were able to describe the language from the organizational and

pragmatic knowledge and how they were developing their communicative competence. Unfortunately, because of its small dimension, this study could not explore, observe, and describe how learners kept an eye on how they monitored their learning strategies for example, but rather in what they were learning and to what extent. The development of metacognitive skills at the level of strategy assessment as proposed by Leaver and Oxford (1996) is another key element that needs special attention from the teacher to be introduced regularly and systematically as part of FA.

Teachers can engage in systematic FA regardless of the load of work they think it would represent; providing FA in the classroom helps teachers and learners monitor their learning in more practical ways. Teachers do not have to keep track of the students' learning process on their own; involving students in monitoring their progress also helps teachers to keep track of students' progress easily. Self-assessment instruments can be recycled and/or reused (as we usually do with much of our teaching material) every time students are assessed. In advance, students manage to assess their learning without having to wait passively for their teacher to mark exams, record and report the results. Later, through a short but effective teacher-student dialogue during class time, they can discuss and agree about their learning. This process can become part of the classroom routine as many others without requiring extra work from the teacher. Giving room to FA as part of our teaching routines may be time consuming at the beginning but practical and rewarding in the end.

To sum up, actively involving students in their assessment by asking them to describe their learning gains and constraints, and by giving value to the voices in their own learning regarding the expected outcomes of the course program guided a very local and small group of people to experience a sense of democracy in the classroom. A call for more democratic procedures is a need and a must as a way to promote a much more humanized society. Simple but meaningful classroom procedures may guide us to meet some of our ideals.

References

Ahumada, L., Bonilla, M., & Del Campo, M. (2010). An approach from formative to constructive evaluation through an autonomous learning process. *HOW: A Colombian Journal for Teachers of English, 17*, 145-164.

Arias, C., & Maturana, L. (2005). Evaluación en lenguas extranjeras: discursos y prácticas [Evaluation in foreign languages: Practice and discourse]. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura, 10*(16), 63-91.

Arias, C., Areiza, H., Estrada, L., Marín, J., & Restrepo, E. (2010). *Sistema de evaluación en lenguas extranjeras* [Foreign languages evaluation system]. Medellín, CO: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia.

Ariza, A. (2008). Unveiling students' understanding of autonomy: Puzzling out a path to learning beyond the EFL classroom. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 10*(1), 47-73.

Ariza, A., & Viáfara, J. (2009). Interweaving autonomous learning and peer-tutoring in coaching EFL student-teachers. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 11*(2), 85-104.

Bachman, L., & Palmer, A. (2002). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Bernal, R., & López, A. (2009). Language testing in Colombia: A call for more teacher education and teacher training in language assessment. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 11*(2), 55-70.

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2006). Assessment for learning in the classroom. In J. Gardner (Ed.), *Assessment and learning* (pp. 9-25). London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

Bonilla, E., & Rodríguez, P. (1997). *Más allá de los métodos: la investigación en ciencias sociales* [Beyond methods: Research in social sciences]. Bogotá, CO: Norma.

Brown, D. (2004). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.

Brown, J., & Hudson, T. (1998). The alternatives in language assessment. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*(4), 653-675.

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Cárdenas, C. (2010). The language portfolio as a self-assessment mechanism in an English course aimed at fostering senior students' autonomy. *HOW: A Colombian Journal for Teachers of English, 17*, 109-130.

Cizek, G. (2010). An introduction to formative assessment: History, characteristics, and challenges. In H. Andrade, & G. Cizek (Eds.), *Handbook of formative assessment* (pp. 3-17). New York, NY: Routledge.

Cotterall, S. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: Principles for designing language courses skills with EAP classes. *ELT Journal, 54*(2), 109-117.

Cortés, M., & Sánchez, D. (2005). Profiles of autonomy in the field of foreign languages. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 6*, 133-140.

Delgado, K. (1998). *Evaluación y calidad de la educación: Nuevos aportes, procesos y resultados* [Evaluation and quality in education: New contributions and outcomes]. Bogotá, CO: Cooperativa Editorial Magisterio.

Estrada, L., & Vallejo, M. (2006). Réussir une évaluation sommative en classe de langues grâce à une évaluation formative performante [Aiming for a successful summative evaluation in the foreign language class through an effective formative evaluation]. Synergies Venezuela. *Revue de didactologie des langues-cultures, 2*, 258-265.

Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher-research from inquiry to understanding*. Toronto, CA: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.

Genesee, F., & Upshur, J. (1996). *Classroom-based evaluation in second language education*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Hadji, C. (1999). *L'évaluation démystifiée* [Evaluation demythified]. Paris, FR: ESF Éditeur.

Johnson, A. (2002). *A short guide to action research* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Johnson, D. (1992). *Approaches to research in second language learning*. London, UK: Longman.

Jorba, J., & Casellas, E. (1997). *La regulación y la autorregulación de los aprendizajes* [Regulation and self-regulation of learning]. Barcelona, ES: Editorial Síntesis.

Leaver, B. L., & Oxford, R. (1996). A synthesis of strategy instruction for language learners. In R. L. Oxford (Ed.), *Language learning strategies around the world: Cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 227-245). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Leedy, P., & Ormrod, J. (2001). *Practical research: Planning and design* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Little, D. (1999). Learner autonomy is more than a Western cultural construct. In S. Cotterall, & D. Crabbe (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change* (pp. 11-18). Framkfurt am Mainn, DE: P. Lang.

Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics, 20*, 71-94.

Martínez, S. (1996). The role of assessment in self-control of learning. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura, 1*(1-2), 87-99.

McMillan, J. (2010). The practical implications of educational aims and contexts for formative assessment. In H. Andrade, & G. Cizek (Eds.), *Handbook of formative assessment* (pp. 41-58). New York, NY: Routledge.

O'Malley, J., & Valdez, L. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners*. New York, NY: Longman.

Oosterhof, A. (2003). *Developing and using classroom assessments*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Peters, M. (2000). Does constructivist epistemology have a place in nurse education? *Journal of Nursing Education, 39*(4), 166-170.

Pryor, J., & Torrance, H. (2002). Defining and investing formative assessment. In J. Pryor, & H. Torrance (Eds.), *Investigating formative assessment: Teaching, learning, and assessment in the classroom* (pp. 8-20). Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Rivers, W. (2001). Autonomy at all costs: An ethnography of metacognitive self-assessment and self-management among experienced language learners. *Modern Language Journal, 85*(2), 279-290.

Rodríguez, E. (2007). Self-assessment practices: An empowering tool in the teaching and learning EFL processes. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, 9*, 229-246.

Rubin, J. (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly, 9*(1), 41-51.

Sierra, A., & Frodden, C. (2003). Promoting student autonomy through self-assessment and learning strategies. HOW*: A Colombian Journal for English Teachers, 10*, 133-166.

Sinclair, B. (1999). Survey review: Recent publication on autonomy in language learning. *ELT Journal, 53*, 309-329.

Torres, S. (2009). Promoting critical thinking through the use of portfolios and self-assessment. *HOW: A Colombian Journal for Teachers of English, 16*, 25-54.

Watson, R. (2002). Using self-assessment for evaluation. *English Teaching Forum, 40*(1), 16-19.

About the Author

Hugo Nelson Areiza Restrepo is an Assistant teacher at Universidad del Valle (Colombia). He holds a Master's in Didactics of English from Universidad de Caldas (Colombia) and a Bachelor Degree in Foreign Languages Education from the University of Antioquia (Colombia). He has worked in teacher education programs in Colombia and EFL/ESL in secondary schools in Colombia and the USA.

Appendix A: Students' Self-Assessment of Tasks 1 and 2 and Interview Questions

Students' self-assessment of tasks 1 and 2

1. How did you feel doing this task?
2. How do you assess your performances in this task?
3. Do you think you achieved the goals this task meant to assess? Why?
4. In what aspects do you feel you succeeded?
5. In what others did you experience difficulties?
6. How do you think you can overcome those difficulties?

Interview questions at the end of the course

1. Which were your main achievements in Level 1?
2. How did you become aware of those achievements?
3. Which were your difficulties in this level?
4. What have you done to overcome those difficulties?
5. How did you feel making self-assessments in this course?
6. Do you think that the procedure of making self-assessments in this classroom is effective?
7. How do you feel talking to me about your self-assessments and your performance in the assessment tasks?
8. Do you think that this conversation is effective?
9. Do you think that your perception about your performance and mine really matched?
10. How did you discover the need to do remedial work?
11. What attitudes or behavior do you think helped you or would help you to improve your performance or overcome your difficulties?

Appendix B: Final Self-Assessment of the Whole Process

Read the self-assessment guide for Level 1. Mark the most suitable statement for your case and make the comments you consider necessary or important.

	Yes	No	NS	Comments
I CAN:				
introduce myself and to others in formal and informal settings				
ask basic personal questions in formal and informal settings				
understand basic personal information (written/oral)				
say/write basic personal information				
ask someone about his/her routine and free time				
understand questions about my routine and free time (written/oral)				

*NS: Not sure.

	Yes	No	NS	Comments
I KNOW WHEN AND HOW TO USE:				
Intonation of yes/no questions				
Intonation of information questions				
Pronunciation of basic vocabulary				
Intonation of yes/no questions				
Verb to be in present				
Affirmative statements				
Negative sentences				
Questions				
Subject pronouns: I/he/she/it/you/we/they				
Possessive adjectives: my/his/her/our/their				
Saxon Possessive: 's				
a/an/the				
Regular plural forms and some irregular plural forms				
Affirmative statements				
Negative sentences				
Simple present				
Affirmative statements				
Negative sentences				
Questions				
Adverbs of frequency (always, usuallly, sometimes, etc.)				
Expressions of time				
Vocabulary of family members				
Vocabulary of routine and free time				
Vocabulary of professions/occupations				
Numbers and the alphabet				

I think **I'm ready** for **level II** because

_____

_____

_____

_____

I think **I'm not ready** for **level II** because

_____

_____

_____

_____

For overcoming my difficulties I need to:

_____

_____

_____

_____