

Teachers' Beliefs about Young EFL Learners' Self-assessment: a Case Study of Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores Macedonian primary EFL teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practices regarding self-assessment of young learners (10 – 12 year-olds). The study surveyed primary EFL teachers (n=30) who teach English to 5th and 6th graders. The results indicated that vocabulary, grammar and reading were more often the focus of self-assessment tasks than the other areas of language learning. This, along with the finding that the receptive language skills were more frequently self-assessed than the productive skills has been attributed to the impact of the external exam. The most frequently used self-assessment techniques were can-do statements and check-lists. The perceived benefits and challenges of self-assessment have been found to be compatible with the findings of other studies.

In spite of their positive attitudes towards learner self-assessment, the teachers expressed awareness of certain problems underlying its implementation as well as uncertainty about how to train learners to self-assess. In line with the conclusions, recommendations have been made regarding the need for greater emphasis on self-assessment of the neglected language areas (speaking and writing), the necessity of using a variety of self-assessment formats and the need for learner training in self-assessment from an early age.

Key words: young learners, English as a foreign language, self-assessment, survey, teachers' beliefs.

Introduction

The era of learner-centered foreign language instruction has been marked by an increased interest in assessment for learning, that is assessment aimed at enhancing learners'

progress rather than measuring learning outcomes. Various forms of authentic assessment have been proposed which enable learners to display a wide range of skills and abilities, overcoming the limitations of traditional tests. Assessments such as portfolios, conferences, projects, self and peer-assessment have particularly drawn the attention of assessment experts. The potential of these assessments to link assessment and instruction in a natural way through motivating and creative classroom activities is especially relevant for young learners. There is a growing interest in involving young learners in their own assessment and training them to learn how to learn.

In this context, developing learners' skills to reflect on learning and monitor their progress by engaging in different self-assessment activities is a priority. Self-assessment gives children an insight into the assessment criteria and their own achievement, fostering a feeling of pride and importance (Ioannou-Georgiu & Pavlou, 2011). Research has revealed many benefits in using self-assessment as well as certain challenges (Valdez-Pierce, 1999).

As Butler and Lee (2010) have pointed out, despite the search for appropriate assessment for young foreign language learners, there is lack of empirical research on this topic.

The purpose of the present study is to fill in a void in the current young learner assessment research by exploring Macedonian primary EFL teachers' beliefs about self-assessment as well as their self-assessment practices.

Teaching and assessing young learners

Unlike the other age groups, young learners acquire foreign languages spontaneously and implicitly, with an inborn enthusiasm and curiosity for learning. They learn best in a multisensory way, that is by accessing information visually, auditorily and kinaesthetically. Engaging all the sensory channels in acquiring input is most naturally enabled by playful activities such as games, songs, storytelling as well as physical activities such as drawing, making things and acting out (Ur, 1996; Harmer, 2005). In addition, children display a need for individual attention from the teacher and a relatively short attention span.

If teaching approaches are to be aligned with assessment approaches, assessing young foreign language learners should reflect the characteristics of children as an age group and parallel learner-centered and child-friendly teaching methodology. Classroom assessment in the young learner classroom is generally characterized by multiple assessment approaches

aimed at assessing different language competences (Yang, 2008). This variety of assessment formats reflects the diversity of classroom activities typical of the young learner classroom.

Traditional paper-and-pencil tests can barely capture the cognitive, affective and physical resources of young learners including their creativity and imaginativeness. A wide range of alternatives to assessment has been proposed to overcome the shortcomings of traditional tests by enabling learners to display a wide array of skills and abilities. These alternative assessments include observations, interviews, skits and role-plays, oral reports, self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolio assessment, etc. These assessment formats have the potential to link assessment to instruction and increase learner motivation through meaningful tasks which often integrate language and content area skills (O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996). In spite of the advantages, many teachers feel uneasy and reluctant to implement alternative assessments due to lack of training, lack of time and resources.

As Hughes (2003) points out, insensitive, inappropriate testing might cause significant damage to children's learning and attitudes. In order to diminish the negative effects of assessment for young learners, assessment tasks should reflect classroom activities and syllabus objectives, and should be integrated into regular classroom activities. They should be brief, varied and should include features such as pictures, color and game-like elements to reduce anxiety and enable the children to perform at their best. The value of assessment for young learners can also be maximized if feedback from assessment is positive and immediate.

In the next part the concept of self-assessment and its relevance for young foreign language learners is discussed.

Self-assessment: the rationale

Self-assessment has been defined as "...the process of reflecting on one's performance and revising or redirecting it in order to improve it..." (Valdez-Pierce, 1999, p. 129).

Self-assessment is considered to play two distinct roles (Butler & Lee, 2010). The first role is one of a measurement tool of learner achievement with respect to language knowledge and skills. In this context, self-assessment has been researched in the light of validation studies examining the correlation between self-assessment scores and scores obtained through teacher-directed assessment. Oskarsson (1989, as cited in Dickinson, 1987) concludes the literature review on self-assessment studies by the claim that there is an overall

agreement between self-assessment and external assessment criteria. Summarizing the research findings on the impact of self-assessment on language skills, Naeini (2011) claims that self-assessment is likely to be as reliable as teacher assessment and that there is a positive correlation between continuous self-assessment and learner self-efficacy.

Other correlation studies report on a considerable variability of self-assessments due to a number of factors such as individual learner differences (proficiency level, age, anxiety levels), the language domain being assessed and the ways in which the items are formulated (Butler & Lee, 2010). Harris (1997) attributes poor correlations between self-assessment and test results to lack of training on the part of the learners.

The second role of self-assessment is that of an empowering learning tool (Butler and Lee, 2010). This role of self-assessment is embedded in the Assessment for Learning conceptual framework and is related to concepts such as metacognition, learner autonomy and self-regulated learning.

Black et al. define Assessment for Learning as “any assessment for which the first priority is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning ...” (2003, p. 2) This term, used interchangeably with terms such as assessment as learning and learning-oriented assessment, refers to a range of formative assessment strategies which facilitate learning in a supportive environment by providing learners with continuous feedback on their progress (Davison, 2011).

As a form of formative assessment, self-assessment supports learning by granting learners the opportunity to take control over the assessment process. Harris suggests that “self-assessment is rightly seen as one of the pillars of learner autonomy.” (1997, p. 12) The concept of learner autonomy has been related to a number of terms such as “independent learning”, “self-directed” and “self-regulated learning”. At the core of these interrelated concepts is the need for learners to take initiative and responsibility for their own learning, that is to learn how to learn.

Learner autonomy entails learners’ ability to reflect on and understand their own learning through self-assessment (Oskarsson, 2009). Rivers (as cited in Oskarsson, 2009) draws attention to the function of self-assessment as a component of metacognition serving the purpose of assessing one’s own cognition. According to Rivers, self-assessment is central to the process of self-regulation and self-directed learning. Self-regulated learners “plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor, and self-evaluate at various points during the process of acquisition” (Zimmerman 1990, pp. 4-5). Learners’ use of self-regulated learning

strategies such as self-assessment has been found to play a significant role in their academic achievement.

In order to elucidate the liaison between self-assessment and learner autonomy, we will briefly look at the nature of the process of self-assessment as described by McMillan and Hearn (2008). According to McMillan and Hearn, when engaged in self-assessment, learners make use of several skills. They self-monitor by focusing attention to some aspect of behavior or thinking often applying external criteria. Then, they self-evaluate. Self-evaluation or self-judgement means "...identifying progress toward targeted performance" (p. 41). These judgements made in relation to established criteria raise learners' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in learning, of the level of their achievement and of what they still need to learn. The third essential skill is setting learning goals and taking steps to improve learning.

One of the key justifications for incorporating self-assessment in a teaching program lies in its potential to promote learner autonomy and the ability to learn how to learn (Dickinson, 1987; Little, 2005). The capacity to self-assess is crucial for developing an ability to self-direct the learning process, to set goals and devise strategies to achieve these goals. Another reason for including self-assessment in teaching is to alleviate the assessment burden on the teacher, which can free the teacher for evaluation that cannot be undertaken by the learners themselves (Harris, 1997).

Apart from the above mentioned benefits of self-assessment procedures, attention can also be drawn to the following (Oscarson, 1989; Harris, 1997). By taking part in their own assessment, learners become more actively engaged in learning, which personalizes the learning process and makes it more meaningful. Reflecting on their own performance, learners raise awareness of their strengths and weaknesses which affects their decisions on the employment of suitable learning strategies. Self-assessment not only requires learners to exercise a variety of learning strategies but also activates a number of higher order thinking skills (Chamot & O'Malley 1990, as cited in Harris 1990). In addition, self-perceptions developed by self-assessment can substantially increase motivation for learning (McMillan & Hearn, 2008). Another advantage of self-assessment is that it gives learners training in assessment which fosters positive attitudes towards assessment and learning in general. Moreover, using self-assessment sensitizes learners to a variety of learning goals and increases the likelihood of managing learning to achieve these goals.

In spite of the numerous advantages, several obstacles to using self-assessment have been identified. Brown (2004) acknowledges that one of the primary problems related to

self-assessment is subjectivity. Learners may either underestimate or overestimate their competence and performance. Objectivity can be encouraged by setting clear assessment criteria and training learners how to apply these criteria to their own work and the work of their peers. A second problem is that there are teachers who underestimate learners' capacity to evaluate their own work. Another issue is that, due to traditional teaching, many learners are reluctant to self-assess because they expect from their teachers to retain the central role both in teaching and assessment (Valdez-Pierce, 1999). Valdez-Pierce also mentions teachers' lack of knowledge and experience in guiding learners in the self-assessment process as a further block to self-assessment.

Self-assessment and young learners

The lack of studies in self-assessment in the young learner classroom can be related to the widely held belief that children are incapable of self-regulating and self-assessing their own learning (Butler & Lee, 2010). Before the age of 7, children are overly optimistic about their ability to learn (Flavell, Friedrichs & Hoyt 1970, as cited in Zimmerman, 1990). Summarizing research on children's ability to self-regulate, Zimmerman (1990) claims that young learners rarely reflect on their performance and their strategic knowledge is fragmentary. Around adolescence, learners become more capable of monitoring and making more accurate academic self-perceptions. Their ability to reflect on their learning and to self-assess has been found to improve around the age of 8 to 12 (Butler & Lee, 2006 as cited in Butler & Lee, 2010). Butler and Lee (2010) reported that 10-12-year-olds could self-assess their performance in English as a foreign language more accurately than 9-10-year-olds. Discussing the benefits of self-assessment for young learners, they highlight the gains in all three areas of self-regulated learning: the cognitive, metacognitive and affective domain. In addition, they emphasize that learner self-assessment can give teachers an insight into learners' affective states which are not normally disclosed through other types of assessment.

Self-assessment should be introduced and trained from an early age. According to Harris (1997), when trained, younger learners are as capable of assessing themselves as older learners. Moreover, "...younger learners may be less resistant to the concept of assessment than more experienced learners" (p. 18). Training learners to use self-evaluation skills is likely to increase their persistence on difficult tasks as well as their confidence and responsibility (McMillan & Hearn, 2008). Self-regulation training does not only improve students' learning, it also improves their perceptions of efficacy (Zimmerman, 1990).

Even children as young as kindergartners can be taught to identify aspects of good work (O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996). Some assessment experts suggest that training learners to self-assess should be preceded by exposure to peer-assessment (Valdez-Pierce, 1999). Learning how to assess the work of others is thought to help learners understand how to apply assessment criteria to their own work.

Based on empirical research, the following considerations for implementing self-assessment with young learners can be highlighted (Dann, 2002, as cited in Butler & Lee, 2010; Ioannu-Georgiu & Pavlou, 2011). Self-assessment should be embedded in everyday classroom activities on a regular basis; self-assessment criteria should be made clear to the learners; teachers need to discuss the differences between learner and teacher judgements; teachers need to be patient and persistent in training learners to self-assess guiding them gradually through the process. Discussing the implementation of self-assessment, Harris (1997) suggests that in order to facilitate reflection with young learners, guided questionnaires should be used but cautions that short open questions such as "What skills have I practised?" should be used rather than abstract questions such as "What strategies did you use?" (p. 19).

Teachers designing self-assessment techniques should adapt them to learners' age and proficiency level, and make sure that they reflect syllabus objectives. Ioannu-Georgiu and Pavlou (2011) advocate that teachers give at least brief comments on young learners' self-assessment as feedback is valuable in supporting and guiding learners in setting and achieving goals. Learners "need to be trained how to interpret feedback, how to make connections between feedback and characteristics of their work, and how they can improve" (Sadler 1998, p. 78, as cited in Joyce, Spiller & Twist 2009, p. 4). When training learners to self-assess, it is important that teachers model the application of criteria and assist learners in understanding how self-assessment works. Different aspects of the learning process can be the subject of self-assessment, such as learners' preferred learning styles and attitudes towards learning, their performance and progress regarding different aspects of language competence, etc.

A number of different self-assessment techniques and procedures can be used with young foreign language learners such as KWL charts, check-lists, can-do statements, dialog journals, learning logs, progress cards, goal cards, questionnaires, interviews, video recordings and computer-assisted self-assessment (Ioannu-Georgiu & Pavlou, 2011; O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Oscarson, 1989). It is recommended that self-assessment

documents are kept in learners' portfolios so that the learners can have an insight into their progress.

In sum, there are many arguments for introducing self-assessment in the young learner classroom. As Cameron and McKay have noted, "Good assessment activities enable children to show their teachers and their parents what they can really do....Good assessment activities make children feel good about what they can do and encourage them to learn more" (2010, p.64).

The Macedonian primary EFL syllabus: a focus on self-assessment

In the Republic of Macedonia the eight-year primary education system was replaced by a nine-year system in 2007. The new reformed curriculum consists of three periods: the first period (grades 1-3), the second period (grades 4-6) and the third period (grades 7-9).

Since 2007 English has been introduced as an obligatory subject in the first grade at the age of around 6. It is taught twice per week in the 1st and the 2nd grade, and three times a week in grades 3 – 9. Learners in the ninth grade (age 14) should reach A2 in English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In the sixth grade learners begin to study a second foreign language with two hours per week. However, most children start to learn foreign languages (most often English) as early as kindergarten.

As far as assessment is concerned, young learners from grades 1-4 are assessed by descriptive comments (usually on a three-point or four-point scale) and older learners (grades 5-9) are assessed by numerical grades (from one to five, five being the highest). A final external exam which consists of a multiple choice computerized test is carried out by the Ministry of Education in grades 4 – 9.

Since this study focuses on self-assessment practices with young learners aged 10 – 12 (grade 5 and 6), we will briefly discuss the EFL syllabus for the 5th and the 6th grade from the perspective of its reference to assessment. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, it advocates a multisensory and holistic approach to language instruction addressing the cognitive, affective and kinesthetic domain of language learning (Ministry of Education of R. Macedonia, 2010; 2011). In comparison to the syllabi for grades 1-3, there is an increased emphasis on the cognitive domain through gradual introduction of metalanguage and explication of grammatical structures. In addition, it is stated that equal attention should be paid to all the four language skills. Grammar and

vocabulary are to be mastered through communicative task-based activities whereas the intercultural component permeates all the other aspects of language learning.

The syllabus also includes guidelines on how to assess learners. Although there is no explicit focus on self- and peer-assessment, it is recommended that the European Language Portfolio is used which promotes reflective life-long learning through learner self-assessment (see also Little, 2005). The assessment section heavily emphasizes the role of formative assessment in providing learners with continuous feedback on their progress, stressing what they can do rather than what they cannot do (Ministry of Education of R. Macedonia, 2010). There are also guidelines on aligning assessment with instruction by embedding assessment tasks in regular classroom activities.

The present study

Objectives and research questions

The primary aim of the present study is to explore teachers' beliefs about young learner (10 – 12 year-olds) self-assessment as well as cast some light on teachers' self-assessment practices in the young learner classroom. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes have been found to play a significant role in teacher decision making both in teaching and assessment (Borg, 2003, as cited in Yang, 2008). As Joyce et al. have emphasized, "Teachers' beliefs about learning are fundamental to whether they will provide the space for students to use self-assessment" (2009, p. 1).

In spite of the general agreement on the impact of teacher beliefs, there is a lack of conclusive findings about the relationship between teacher beliefs and teachers' assessment practices (Yang, 2008). As Yang has pointed out, research has shown that apart from teacher beliefs, assessment practices have been influenced by other factors such as assessment education and teachers' perceived assessment competency.

The important role self-assessment plays in training learners for life-long learning and the lack of research in this area are the main reasons for exploring this topic.

The present study focuses on the following research questions:

1. In which areas of English language learning do Macedonian primary EFL teachers most frequently implement learner self-assessment?
2. How do teachers implement self-assessment? (Which self-assessment techniques do they use? Do teachers train learners to self-assess and how?)

3. How do teachers perceive self-assessment? What benefits and difficulties do they see in implementing it?

Significance of the study

The study is intended to fill in a research gap regarding self-assessment in the young EFL classroom in Macedonia. It is expected that it would raise awareness of the current state of using self-assessment with young learners. Moreover, it is believed that by diagnosing the problems in implementing self-assessment it would bring about improvement in this area. In addition, the study may provide basis for future research interested in examining related issues such as learners' attitudes towards self-assessment, the correlation between self-assessment and test results, the effects of self-assessment training on learners' motivation and overall achievement, etc.

Participants

The participants were 30 English teachers teaching EFL learners aged 10 – 12 (grade 5 and 6 of the nine-year-primary education). The sample included state sector teachers from different parts of the country.

Instrument and procedure

A survey was administered online. The questionnaire (see Appendix) designed for this study consisted of three sections. The aim of the first section (section A) was to gather data on which aspects of foreign language learning teachers most often use learner self-assessment with (research question 1). There were eight statements examining the frequency of use of self-assessment procedures with different aspects of foreign language learning (vocabulary, grammar or the four language skills) on a four-point Likert scale. There were no specific items aimed at exploring self-assessment regarding language functions and culture as these components are interspersed through all the other components of the syllabus. This part also sought to explore how frequently teachers have learners reflect on their preferred ways of learning and how frequently they use self-assessment procedures which encourage learners to express their feelings and attitudes towards English classes.

The second section (section B) investigated the following aspects of teachers' use of self-assessment procedures in the EFL classroom (research question 2): how often teachers compare learner self-assessment with teacher assessment; whether they train their learners to self-assess and whether they discuss with them samples of exemplary work and assessment criteria; whether they enclose self-assessment documents in learners' portfolios and which self-assessment techniques they use.

The last part (section C) of the questionnaire explored teachers' perceptions of the importance and benefits of implementing self-assessment as well as their beliefs about the difficulties underlying the implementation of self-assessment (research question 3).

The data were coded in terms of categories and the coded data were then referred to the research questions.

Results and discussion

The results from section A revealed which aspects of EFL learning the teachers focused on most in implementing self-assessment. Although the responses were mixed, certain patterns could be established. Grammar and vocabulary knowledge turned out to be more frequently the subject of self-assessment than the language skills. This may stem from teachers' belief that grammar and vocabulary have a prominent role in language learning. Despite the recommendations in the EFL syllabus that they should be taught and, hence, assessed as integral parts of the language skills, it seems that they are still perceived as isolated components. Reading skills were found to be the subject of self-assessment more often than listening skills. The receptive language skills, in turn, are more frequently self-assessed than the productive skills. The prominence of grammar, vocabulary and reading as areas for self-assessment may be due to the impact of the external exam which consists of a multiple choice computerized test of grammar, vocabulary and reading. In spite of the emphasis on developing learners' communicative competence in the syllabus, the format of this high-stakes exam has an inevitable influence on teachers, learners and parents' perceptions of what is important and what is less important in language learning. As far as the productive skills are concerned, teachers have learners self-assess their speaking skills somewhat more often than their writing skills. Another finding was that the teachers spent more time on self-assessment of learners' preferred ways of learning than on self-assessment of their feelings and attitudes towards the English classes.

The second section (B) provided an insight into certain characteristics of the self-assessment procedures the teachers used. As far as question 9 is concerned, 19 teachers responded that they often compared learner self-assessments with their own assessment, whereas 10 teachers said that they sometimes did that.

Regarding the use of specific self-assessment techniques, almost all the teachers said that they used can-do statements and checklists. In addition to these techniques, four teachers also used reflective questions, such as: What did I learn during this lesson? Which words do I still need to learn? What do I need to improve in my speaking/reading? One teacher said she asked the learners to write letters to her to reflect on learning informally and express their feelings about the English classes. The popularity of can-do statements and checklists among the teachers may be due to the fact that these formats are most often represented in textbooks. Another reason may be that they are relatively easy to check as compared, for instance, to learning logs or dialog journals. However, as it has been indicated by the findings of another study (Yang, 2008), a variety of assessment tasks needs to be used in order to cope with the diverse needs and characteristics of the learners. In the same vein, a variety of self-assessment tasks would address the heterogeneity of learners more adequately and would provide a deeper insight into their language ability.

In response to question 12, twenty-seven out of the thirty respondents said that they trained their students to self-assess. Below are some of the comments individual teachers made in response to this question:

- At least twice during each term we discuss can-do statements
- I present checklists of imaginary learners (it makes them more interested)
- I give learners examples of differently graded student work
- I sometimes involve learners in designing self-assessment instruments
- I should do it more often
- I use it before unit tests so that the learners become aware of weaknesses and ways of overcoming them

The above comments reveal that although the majority of the teachers gave an affirmative answer to this question, it is only individuals who gave an example of how they did that. By ‘training to self-assess’ the teachers meant several procedures, such as familiarizing learners with the application of grading criteria to their work and with samples of exemplary work, discussing self-assessment forms before learners fill them in, and using self-assessment as a diagnostic tool in preparation for progress tests. However, only eight teachers discussed samples of exemplary work and the assessment criteria with the learners.

This relatively small number may be attributed to the heavy workload of the teachers or to lack of training.

The above comments were indicative of the sporadic nature of the training and of the uncertainty of the teachers in this respect. It seemed that most of the teachers were not clear about how to prepare learners for self-assessment although they felt that the learners needed more training in this area. It was obvious that the learners did not get enough guidance on how to self-assess. Moreover, they were not informed about the aims and reasons for implementing self-assessment. Butler and Lee (2010) found that in order for self-assessment to be effective, it is essential that the students understand the reasons for conducting it.

Section C revealed teachers' perceptions of and attitudes to learner self-assessment. Teachers' answers to question 13 disclosed generally favorable attitudes. Almost all the teachers perceived self-assessment as important and beneficial. Generally favorable teacher attitudes to learner self-assessment were also reported by Bullock (2010), Butler and Lee (2010) and Joyce et al. (2009).

A set of responses was generated which showed that the majority of the teachers viewed self-assessment as an empowering learning tool. The most frequent response was that it raised learners' awareness of the learning process and their achievement; of their strengths and weaknesses. Getting a clearer picture of learners' knowledge is important because it is a starting point for self-directing future learning. Developing the habit of self-reflection, an important characteristic of autonomous learners, was emphasized as an outcome by one-third of the participants in the study. They were aware of the crucial role self-assessment plays in directing the process of reflecting on learning and setting personal goals, "...critical thinking develops...self-assessment develops the habit of self-reflection...learners learn how to set and achieve personal goals..." One teacher noted that "...it makes learners more realistic in their expectations and goals..." Most teachers agreed that self-assessment promoted learner-centered assessment and learning and that it increased learners' responsibility for their own learning, another aspect of autonomous learning. As most of the respondents believed, this significantly raised motivation for learning and maximized learning outcomes, "the learners become more engaged in the lesson, more motivated and enthusiastic... they begin to think of employing better learning strategies...they become better learners, especially lower achievers."

More than half of the teachers emphasized the role of self-assessment in enhancing the assessment process and strengthening the liaison between teaching and assessment, "...it makes assessment more learner-centered...it is less threatening than teacher

assessment...learners become more self-confident...” Being less stressful than teacher assessment, self-assessment was perceived to foster positive attitudes towards assessment in general, which in turn increased learners’ self-confidence and created a better classroom atmosphere, as some of the teachers pointed out. Self-assessment was also seen as a valuable source of feedback on learners’ progress and a resource in setting assessment criteria, “...teachers get valuable feedback on learners’ progress...learners learn the characteristics of good work.”

The results outlined above parallel the results obtained in a study on teachers’ beliefs about teenage learner self-assessment (Bullock, 2010). The teachers in Bullock’s study identified self-assessment as an “autonomy-supportive approach to learning” (p.120) and as an approach which engaged learners in participating in the learning process actively. The major benefits of self-assessment as perceived by the teachers in this study were raising awareness of learners’ strengths and weaknesses, stimulating motivation for learning, giving learners a sense of ownership and an opportunity to see their progress.

Despite their positive attitudes, some teachers voiced certain concerns regarding the implementation of self-assessment. For instance, several teachers had doubts about the reliability of self-assessment, “...learners often assess themselves higher than the teacher...some learners are not interested in it as they don’t take it seriously...it is unreliable...some learners are not honest...” Students not taking self-assessment seriously which was partly attributed to culture and age was also perceived as the main challenge by the teachers in Bullock’s study (2010). In our study, the problem of the learners not taking self-assessment seriously was also related to learners’ age, “...at this age they don’t understand the aim of self-assessment...at this age they are not mature enough for this sort of assessment.” This finding corroborates the findings of other research on self-assessment (Zimmerman, 1990; Butler & Lee, 2010; O’Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996).

Pertinent to this perceived challenge is the belief expressed by several teachers that self-assessment is a skill that needs to be learned, “...it can be difficult at the beginning but is less so with time... it is not difficult if you train learners from an early age...it is not difficult as long as you explain to the learners why it is good for them.” The need for teachers to train learners to self-assess and provide them with guidance and support has been widely recognized (Butler & Lee, 2010; Joyce et al. 2009; Harris, 1997).

Another perceived problem was that the learners expected that the teacher alone was responsible for assessment, “...learners are used to other types of assessment...it is not easy to make them reflect on their own learning...” Reflecting the findings of previously

mentioned research (Valdez-Pierce, 1999), this view indicated that even in the age of learner-centered curricula, the roots of traditionalism are difficult to eradicate. For instance, one teacher stated that the learners were unwilling to get accustomed to the new roles, "...learners have already set the roles: 'we are here to learn and the teacher is here to teach and assess'."

It is interesting that it was only one teacher who mentioned time constraints as an obstacle to self-assessment practices, "...it is time-consuming for teachers to check them and write feedback." It is also worth mentioning that a couple of teachers valued peer-assessment more than self-assessment because it "...builds social skills."

Conclusions

The findings of the present study have shed some light on Macedonian primary EFL teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards young learner (10 – 12 year-olds) self-assessment as well as on teachers' self-assessment practices. The results indicated that not all the areas of language learning are allotted the same attention with regard to self-assessment. Grammar, vocabulary and reading were found to be the subject of self-assessment more often than the other skills. This, along with the finding that the receptive language skills were more frequently self-assessed than the productive skills can be attributed to the impact of the external exam. Spending more time on self-assessment of speaking and writing which play a significant role in fostering learners' communicative competence would imply that these skills are equally important. In addition, more explicit emphasis on self-assessment and peer-assessment as well as other types of alternative assessment in the EFL syllabus would give teachers clearer guidelines on how to implement them.

The results revealed that teachers mostly used can-do statements and self-assessment check-lists while some of them also used reflective questions. Using other self-assessment techniques such as learning logs, journals, progress cards and goal cards is likely to facilitate learner reflection and provide information on learners' progress from a variety of sources, thus ensuring greater reliability. Although most participants in the study said they trained learners to self-assess, few of them gave an example of what training really meant.

Finally, teachers' attitudes towards learner self-assessment were generally favorable. Teachers perceived self-assessment as an empowering learning tool, as a key to promoting learner-centered assessment and learner autonomy. However, teachers expressed concerns about the implementation of self-assessment related to learners' capability of accurate self-assessment, learners' reluctance to get accustomed to the new assessment culture, and

teachers' heavy workload. Both the perceived benefits and challenges are in line with the findings of related research.

It can be concluded that in spite of the challenges underlying its implementation, self-assessment plays an important role in promoting learner-centered assessment and life-long learning. However, it needs to be stressed that if self-assessment is to reach its full potential, learners should be trained to use it from an early age and it should be introduced systematically into everyday classroom activities. Moreover, teachers' assessment skills need to be developed by continuous professional support.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

(Teachers' beliefs about using self-assessment with young EFL learners aged 10-12)

Choose the relevant option by ticking the appropriate box:

(Section A)

1. How often do you have learners self-assess their vocabulary knowledge?

never rarely sometimes often

2. How often do you have learners self-assess their grammar knowledge?

never rarely sometimes often

3. How often do you have learners self-assess their listening skills?

never rarely sometimes often

4. How often do you have learners self-assess their reading skills?

never rarely sometimes often

5. How often do you have learners self-assess their speaking skills?

never rarely sometimes often

6. How often do you have learners self-assess their writing skills?

never rarely sometimes often

7. How often do you use self-assessment which encourages learners to express their feelings and attitudes towards English classes?

never rarely sometimes often

8. How often do you have learners reflect on their preferred ways of learning?

never rarely sometimes often

(Section B)

9. How often do you compare learners' self-assessment with your own assessment of their work?

never rarely sometimes often

10. Do you enclose samples of learner self-assessment in learners' portfolios?

Yes No

11. Which of the following self-assessment techniques do you use?

can-do-statements

learning logs

self-assessment checklists

other formats: _____

12. Do you train learners to self-assess? For e.g., do you discuss with the learners samples of exemplary work and assessment criteria?

(Section C)

13. Is learner self-assessment important? Can you name any benefits?

14. Do you find self-assessment difficult to use? Explain.
