

# An Examination of the Motivational Impact of Learner-Directed Assessment on Japanese University Students' L2 Writing Skills

Juergen J. Bulach

## **Abstract**

This article examines the effectiveness of learner-directed assessment (LDA) as compared to teacher-directed assessment (TDA) in an L2 writing classroom and analyzes the reactions of the university students who took part in this study. The participants were a class of Japanese university students enrolled in a required English Department multi-skills course. I assigned the students two book reports and evaluated their first report according to a prescribed set of grading criteria but instructed the students to assess the second report on their own using the same criteria. The students completed a questionnaire regarding their performance on the two assignments at the conclusion of the second assignment. I analyzed the questionnaire data to determine which type of assessment was more effective in motivating students to improve their writing skills, traditional TDA or LDA. The questionnaire results revealed that LDA was considerably more effective than TDA in motivating students to complete their reports correctly, but that most of the students still preferred to keep TDA as a regular component in their L2 writing classroom.

## **What is Learner - Directed Assessment?**

The traditional view of educational assessment is that students are evaluated by their instructor. LDA provides a very different approach by putting students in charge of evaluating their own learning. It is self-assessment that “refers to the involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning” (Boud & Falchikov, 1989, p. 529).

## **Setting and Participants**

The participants in this study were 24 first and second-year English Department students at a university in

Tokyo who ranged from high-intermediate to low-advanced in English ability. The students were enrolled in a required multi-skills English Department course which contained a strong writing component.

### **Purpose and Aim**

The overall purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of LDA in the L2 writing classroom with the aim of analyzing students' reactions to it as a regular component in their writing lessons.

### **Study Questions**

The first question of this study was whether LDA was more effective than TDA in motivating students to complete their book reports correctly. The second question dealt with the students' preference for incorporating LDA as a regular component in their L2 writing lessons.

### **Description of the Study**

The study was divided into two parts based on two assigned book reports. The requirements for both assignments were identical, except that I assessed (TDA) the students at the end of the first assignment, while students assessed themselves (LDA) at the end of the second one.

As part of the requirements of their course, students had to write two book reports on novels of their own choice according to specific literature features outlined in their student handbook. These features were setting, point of view, conflict, climax, symbolism, irony and theme. The instruction also differed with both assignments. I instructed students on the specific use of the features before they started their TDA book reports but refrained from doing this for their LDA book reports. I informed the students that they would be responsible for the grading of their second reports and would assess them using the same grade descriptors as I had used on their TDA reports. These grade descriptors were listed in their student handbooks.

### **Questionnaire**

I submitted a questionnaire to the students about their experience in using TDA and LDA on their two book reports. The questionnaire contained eight questions, the first seven of which were multiple-choice while the last question was an open-ended one. The reason for including the open-ended question was to elicit students' comments about their preferences which could not be obtained in a multiple-choice format.

Table 1 Results of Students' Questionnaire Answers

Questions and Answers	Results
1. Is getting a good grade the most important factor for you when writing a book report?	
a. Yes, it is.	16
b. No, it isn't.	8
2. Which report did you enjoy writing more, the first report or the second report?	
a. I enjoyed writing the first report more.	5
b. I enjoyed writing the second report more.	18
c. I enjoyed writing them about the same	1
3. Which report did you spend more time on writing, the first report or the second one?	
a. More time on the first report.	17
b. More time on the second report.	4
c. About the same time on both reports.	3
4. Which report did you proofread more, the first report or the second one?	
a. The first report more.	3
b. The second report more.	15
c. About the same.	6
5. Did you study the literature features more for your first report or for your second report?	
a. More for my first report.	4
b. More for my second report.	14
c. The same for both reports.	6
6. Would you prefer to grade future book reports on your own, or do you want your teacher to do this?	
a. I would prefer to grade reports on my own.	2
b. I would prefer my teacher to grade my reports.	19
c. I don't care who would grade my reports.	3

7. Do you think you are better at giving yourself a fair grade on your book report or that your teacher is better?
- |   |    |
|---|----|
| a. I think I am better.                         | 0  |
| b. I think my teacher is better.                | 22 |
| c. I think my teacher and I are about the same. | 2  |

8. Please write freely why you prefer to grade your own report or have your teacher grade your report:

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Note: Students were instructed to select only one answer to each question for questions #1-#7 and to write their comments freely for question #8.

### **Motivation and Learner - Directed Assessment**

How to keep students motivated in the classroom is an ongoing question that many instructors struggle to answer on a daily basis. Instructors are obligated to evaluate their students' classwork according to the academic standards set by school administrators and laid out in school curricula. Students who perform well are rewarded with good grades, while those who underperform are punished with bad ones. This is a very authoritarian view of the role of grades in education, but it is one to which many academic institutions adhere. (Heron, 1981, Ekbatani, 2000) Thus, learning is done primarily for extrinsic reasons with the underlying logic that all students should react to this system of rewards and punishment in the same way. "Rewards and punishment are too often the only tools available in the motivational arsenal of many teachers. Although these two timeworn tactics can control many student behaviors, their indiscriminate use can seriously undermine students' intrinsic motivation for the activities and behaviors being controlled" (Dornyei, 2001a). In other words, extrinsically-oriented educational systems view students as possessing the same inherent motivational base required for meeting uniform pedagogical goals.

The drawback of this one-dimensional view of assessment is that it often fails to take into account those students who are not easily motivated by the prospect of receiving superior grades. The various reasons instructors and schools typically give for students' poor classroom performance are the student's attitude, home problems, mental disorders, a lack of study skills, discipline issues, etc. The origin of these reasons emanate either from the student or outside of the school.

Instructors and school administrators often fail to consider that the root of the problem may not stem from the student or his or her environment but with the manner of instruction and/or the evaluation itself. If the reason for poor grades is correctly identified as the type of instruction or evaluation, instructors and school administrators are usually loathe to enact changes to suit the troubled students. The standard response is that the system cannot make adjustments for demotivated students due to organizational, logistical or financial considerations. The instructor and/or school administrators will typically organize meetings and talks with the student with the goal of convincing him or her to adapt to the established system of education. The choice for the student is to either respond to these limited overtures or refuse and fail.

LDA is a reasonable alternative for students who are encountering problems in extrinsically-oriented

curricula, however. It provides students with the unique opportunity to exercise responsibility and independence for their own learning. By making the student more responsible for his or her own learning, LDA puts the focus more on the learning process. It provides students with a fresh, new way of looking at the same materials by evaluating their own work which is one way to aid demotivated students to regain their desire to learn.

### Discussion of Questionnaire Results

As we can see in Table 1, the data collected from the questionnaires revealed that the students' reactions to the impact of LDA on their classwork was mostly positive. The data shows that most students (18 students) enjoyed writing the second report more than the first one and that almost the same number of them (17 students) answered that they spent more time on proofreading their second reports than they had on their first report. Almost equally compelling was the number of students (14 students) who replied that they had studied the literature features more for their second report than they had for their first one.

Students' positive reactions to LDA were limited to how LDA impacted their classwork, however. The remaining questions dealt more with how students thought of the prospect of having LDA as a regular part of their class structure. The students' answers indicate that they were less than pleased with this option. The overwhelming majority of them (19 students) said they would prefer to have their teacher grade their reports if given the choice of grading the reports on their own. Almost all the students (22 students) replied that they think their teacher is better at giving them a fair grade over themselves.

These results indicate an even split in how the students viewed LDA. On the one hand, their answers showed that they liked and worked harder on their LDA reports than they did on their TDA ones. The improvement was very noticeable to me as well. In the class sessions in which students wrote part of their reports, the students tended to refer to their handbooks more than they had when they wrote their first report. As a whole, they also posed fewer questions to me while working on their LDA reports.

The overall quality of the TDA and LDA reports differed as well. On the TDA assignment, most students (18 students) failed to address one to three of the literature features listed in their handbooks. These omissions negatively impacted their grades. The LDA reports had very different results in that almost all of the students (21 students) included the features in their LDA reports. It was not surprising then that the LDA reports resulted in higher grades for most of the the students over the TDA reports.

The usual pedagogical assumption is that students prefer the type of assessment in which they received a higher grade. This was not the case in this study as was evidenced by the students' dichotomous answers to the two types of assessments. They clearly preferred TDL over LDA even though most of them received a lower assessment on it.

There are various reasons for this preference as evidenced in the answers students provided to the open-ended question (#8) on the questionnaire. I have listed their comments in no particular order as follows:

- I prefer my teacher to grade my report because he knows better than me how to grade.
- It's not my job to grade my report.

- Why do we have to grade our papers? I don't want to do it.
- We aren't teachers, so I want my teacher to grade my report.
- I can learn more from my teacher's corrections than from mine.
- I'm not a teacher so I don't want to grade my report.
- Grading my own report takes too much time. I don't want to do it.
- I don't like to grade my own report, because I'm not sure if I can do it well.
- Teachers are supposed to grade reports not the students.
- We are not educated as much as teachers.
- Teachers understand mistakes better than students.
- Students do not have the time to grade their reports.
- Teachers can analyze writing better than students.
- Every student may grade differently so maybe it isn't fair.
- I don't like to check my own writing.

As can be seen from the above-listed comments, the students were very strongly against LDA. The comments reveal that they were uncomfortable with grading their own reports and that they view grading as the traditional domain of the teacher and that they, as students, should not be given this role. LDA was more effective than TDA in this study, but in the minds of the students, its success as an educational tool does not warrant enough reason to offer it as a replacement for TDA. The obvious caveat to this overwhelmingly negative view of LDA is that the students are accustomed to TDA and have had little experience with LDA. In order to gauge students' degree of acceptance of LDA, a longer, more extensive study of its impact would be advantageous.

### **Questions of Validity and Reliability**

The standard criticism of LDA is that it lacks validity and reliability, mainly because students do not possess the objectivity or capacity to judge their own performance, or as in the area of second-language acquisition, fluency in a language (Dickinson, 1992). If students are provided with adequate training and guidance in the use of rubrics such as scales, descriptors, and examples, then they are fully capable of evaluating themselves. "It is important to realize, however, that learners will not automatically take ownership of their motivational disposition but need to be supported in this process. In particular, their awareness needs to be raised about the variety of the potential mental reinforcers they can apply" (Dornyei, 2005, p. 111-112). Once they have been provided with adequate support, there is no reason to doubt they can objectively assess their own progress.

In regard to this study, the issues of validity and reliability about LDA did not present problems. Although I did not reveal it to the students, I graded their second book reports and kept my evaluations to myself. I did this specifically to determine how their grades matched up against mine. The students' grades were exactly consistent with mine except in two cases in which the two students awarded themselves a lower grades than the ones I had assessed them. It is interesting to note that the two particular students were the highest academic achievers in the class. This is not altogether surprising because of the indicative feature of LDA which shows that higher-perform-

ing students are overly critical of their own work when initially exposed to LDA. (Boud & Falchikov, 1989) After some time, they soon learn to become comfortable with assessing themselves.

### Conclusion

This study reveals that LDA is an effective educational tool in the promotion of students' L2 writing skills. LDA offers students an opportunity to examine their own writing in a more personal and critical way than TDA. However, the study also showed that there were challenges in encouraging students to accept LDA over TDA. The main reasons for the reluctance stemmed from students' traditional view of the instructor as responsible for their assessment and their discomfort with the high degree of responsibility and independence that self-assessment requires. The findings do not suggest that LDA does not have a place in the acquisition of second-language L2 writing skills. It does indicate, however, that any introduction of LDA into the classroom be attempted with patience and understanding for students as they make this adjustment in becoming more responsible and independent for not only their own learning but the assessment of it as well.

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### Appendix

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect research information about your participation in this learning activity. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Select only one answer to each question.

1. Is getting a good grade the most important factor for you when writing a book report?

- a. Yes, it is.
  - b. No, it isn't.
2. Which report did you enjoy writing more, the first report or the second report?
- a. I enjoyed writing the first report more.
  - b. I enjoyed writing the second report more.
  - c. I enjoyed writing them about the same.
3. Which report did you spend more time on writing, the first report or the second one?
- a. More time on the first report.
  - b. More time on the second report.
  - c. About the same time on both reports.
4. Which report did you proofread more, the first report or the second one?
- a. The first report more.
  - b. The second report more.
  - c. About the same.
5. Did you study the literature features more for your first report or for your second report?
- a. More for my first report.
  - b. More for my second report.
  - c. The same for both reports.
6. Would you prefer to grade future book reports on your own, or do you want your teacher to do this?
- a. I would prefer to grade reports on my own.
  - b. I would prefer my teacher to grade my reports.
  - c. I don't care who would grade my reports.
7. Do you think you are better at giving yourself a fair grade on your book report or that your teacher is better?
- a. I think I am better.
  - b. I think my teacher is better.
  - c. I think my teacher and I are about the same.
8. Please write freely why you prefer to grade your own report or have your teacher grade your report: